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PRESSURE SUITS

Gabe Newell on Valve's unstoppable new empire and Half-Life's irresistible future

THE NEW REPUBLIC

Bioware unveils Dragon Age, an epic RPG which leaves the tabletop behind





You've probably never heard of the biggest games in the world; almost certainly never played them. And while there are many different reasons for that – region lock-outs, cultural barriers, personal standards – there is one factor that unites them all: they're on PC. From *Audition* to *Freestyle*, *Mu Online* to *Bookworm Adventures*, these games don't figure in talk of AAA best-sellers, or in arguments about Mario, Lara or Tommy. PC gaming – the real PC gaming – is our big collective blind spot.

The mobile phone was supposed to be the machine that finally put gaming into everybody's hands, but watching that industry's jerky progress has proven a distraction from the machine that had already achieved it. Take a day and try to find someone with access to a PC who's never played some kind of game on it. See if you can find a friend or colleague who has sat there staunchly without ever resorting to *Minesweeper*, or browsed over to *The ESP Game*. Or maybe it's you who isn't 'a PC gamer', but who whiles away a lunch-break with a round of *Urban Dead*. The PC makes players of everyone who sits in front of it.

For years – decades now – the debate about PC gaming has hinged on emphasising its advantages over its console cousins: its huge market, its lack of manufacturer control, its connectivity, its rapid technological evolution. But it's too late, now, for that debate. No matter the enormous potential of PS3, Wii and 360, the PC is, overwhelmingly, the ascendant force in gaming. And while that may not mean that the best gaming experiences become PC experiences, it does mean that the PC has become gaming's most important ambassador. So, from Gabe Newell's insights into the future on p48, and BioWare's epic return to PC on p42, and a full report on the state of PC play on p62, you may just find you change your mind about the world's dominant gaming platform.



EDGE

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"Wow. I love what you did with the bit-mapping. Very stylish, very aggressive. Very, very Miyamoto."







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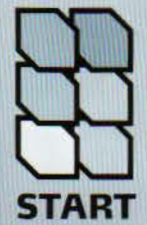


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SALES

The highs and lows of a gaming year

The headlines were dominated by PS3 and Wii launches, but the buoyant 2006 games market was driven as much by PS2, DS and PSP

There seems little to connect the first rule of light entertainment with games console manufacturers. But while generations of funnymen have been commanded to 'leave them wanting more,' so frontmen for the console firms have increasingly found themselves adopting a similar tone with fewer comic consequences.

Such is the sophistication of PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 production that the holiday season's supercharged demand will likely outstrip supply for many Christmases to come. Santa, you have been warned.

The reason is that the console makers can't hope to match the global retail requirement for up to five million units per console each December. At best, their just-in-time manufacturing and distribution systems are set up to sustainably deliver a couple of million units per month. Sony is still trying to produce a million PlayStation 3s per month, for example.

Even Nintendo, which took the strategic decision to opt out of the console war's technical one-upmanship and build a stockpile of Wiis for launch, has suffered. The vagaries of seasonal logistics have had its PR department skipping around the veracity of whether one million Wiis were available in the US by early December, or whether 'well more than a million Wii systems' would be available by the end of the year. It has, however, managed to upshift DS Lite production to over two million per month.

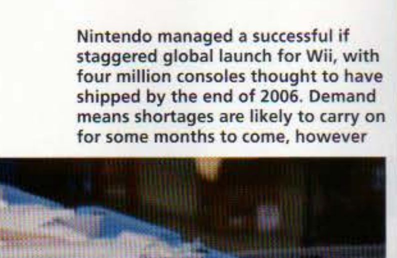

Delays and shortages of the PS3 may have prompted consumers to buy a 360, a console with a userbase of six million by October and a year's head start

Whatever statistical economics have been peddled during the past months, each company has plenty of reasons to be cheerful as they enter the new year

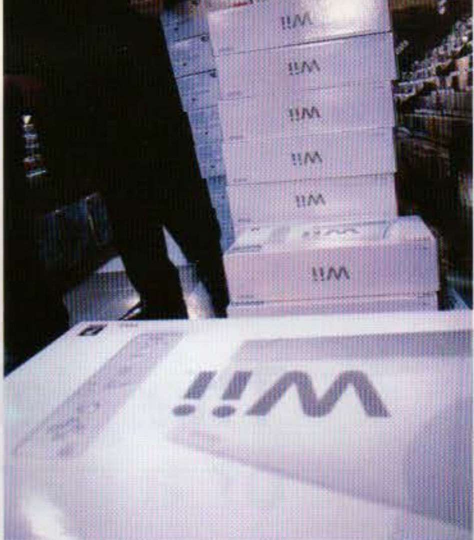
Whatever statistical economics have been peddled during the past months, however – and there are varying levels of inaccuracy associated with any figures emanating from Sony, Microsoft or Nintendo – each company has plenty of reasons to be cheerful as they enter the new year.

Microsoft missed its ambitious target of shifting ten million Xbox 360s before Sony sold its first PlayStation 3. Still, considering it was claiming an install base of six million as late as early October, it's got plenty of momentum and is clearly the leader of the pack. With an ongoing boost from the multi-million-selling *Gears Of War*, as well as high expectations for *Halo 3* and an invitation to the first *Grand Theft Auto* multiformat launch to look forward to, it would be a huge surprise if Microsoft doesn't start 2008 in the vanguard, albeit with its numerical advantage reduced.

Similarly, whether Nintendo hit its target of four million Wiis shipped globally by December 31 remains one for the analysts to chew over. What's undeniable is that it will sell all the hardware it can manufacture for months to come. Perhaps more importantly though, it has completely turned around its position in terms of media attitude. All references to 'that silly name' have been swept away in a positive word-of-mouth flood about controller innovation, which stories of Remotes projected through windows and plasma screens only seem to have reinforced.



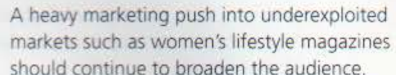
Nintendo managed a successful if staggered global launch for Wii, with four million consoles thought to have shipped by the end of 2006. Demand means shortages are likely to carry on for some months to come, however











A heavy marketing push into underexploited markets such as women's lifestyle magazines should continue to broaden the audience.

So to Sony, which has suffered the most difficult console gestation period. It spent 2006 trying to explain shifting release dates and reorganised senior executives, all the while defending a high price and limbering up for a prolonged strategic battle relating to the Blu-ray technology – a crucial component of PlayStation 3's launch delays, hardware shortages and pricing. How Blu-ray and the Microsoft-supported HD-DVD standard fare in 2007 will be a major factor in the long-term success of each company's console.

Yet even as some blogs were seemingly succumbing to the temptation to hang vapourware flags over the entire PlayStation 3 project, queues duly sprung up throughout North America and Japan, with initial releases of 386,000 and 197,000 units sold in the respective territories during the holiday period. Certainly Sony failed to reach its promised million-unit shipment before the end of 2006, and let's not forget back at E3 that target was four million. As with Microsoft's stutter last year, however, the production lines are now rolling steadily and it will surely be only a matter of time before the initial demand for several million units has been satisfied.



Nintendo's DS proved to be one of the 2006's best performers both in terms of hardware sales as well as its Touch! Generations games such as *Brain Training* and *Nintendogs*





But if console launches provided 2006's fizz, behind the tills not even a *Gears Of War*-powered Xbox 360 boom would have been enough to keep the profits of publishers such as EA and Activision ticking over.

In January, few expected much in the way of profits anyhow. EA thought its sales would be flat at best, while warning investors it could make a loss too. Activision predicted its sales would be down as much as a third, or $400 million (£203 million). Overall, most market analysts reckoned total software sales would fall by about five per cent, or around $1 billion (£508 million) in terms of the global games market. Hence 2006 was marked down by publishers as being one of those lean years where belts are tightened and expensive indulgences that can't be tied into a return on an investment spreadsheet – E3 anyone? – were quickly jettisoned.

As the year progressed, however, things started to look up. Now the US hardware and software market is expected to easily breach the $13 billion (£6.6 billion) level, while UK software sales should do better than last year's £1.35 billion.

This has trickled through to company predictions, with EA suggesting it will make a small





The best selling Wii game, unsurprisingly, was *Twilight Princess,* (above) which Nintendo claimed had sold at a rate of three games for every four Wiis sold, better even than that of *Super Mario 64*

profit in the financial year ending March 31, while the likes of THQ and Ubisoft expect to have their most successful trading periods ever.

Yet if new consoles stole the Christmas headlines, this wider games industry recovery was due as much to good old PS2 as its shiner replacements. Even the million-dollar-rated excitement of PS3 and Wii's launches, together with a buoyant 360 sector, was outshone in the US during November. PlayStation 2's *Final Fantasy XII* outsold *Twilight Princess* for example, with as-yet PS2-only *Guitar Hero II* also selling well. The strength of older hardware sales has been surprising too. In North America during November, Sony sold 664,000 PS2s, while Microsoft shifted 511,00 Xbox 360s and Nintendo 476,000 Wiis.

In fact, in the US, PlayStation 2 outsold Xbox 360 for the majority of the year; 3.3 million to 2.8 million units. Of course, such comparisons are something of oranges versus cheese (or apples to chalk if you prefer), especially in terms of price and audience, but it does demonstrate how difficult it will be for Microsoft or Nintendo to unseat the PlayStation brand as the de facto for massmarket gaming.

Equally significant in this respect is the growing strength of the handheld market with both Sony and Nintendo talking up the halo effect of their launches on sales. During November, PSP sold 412,000 in the US (up 50 per cent on 2005's figures), while during the same period Nintendo shifted 918,000 of its DS Lites, as well as 641,000 Game Boys.

Interestingly, in the US, PSP outsold DS for the first five months of the year, at least until Nintendo demonstrated the power of hardware redesign with the launch of the DS Lite. It then outsold PSP by a ratio of more than 2:1 for the rest of the year. US sales through to November totalled two million PSPs versus 3.8 million DSes.

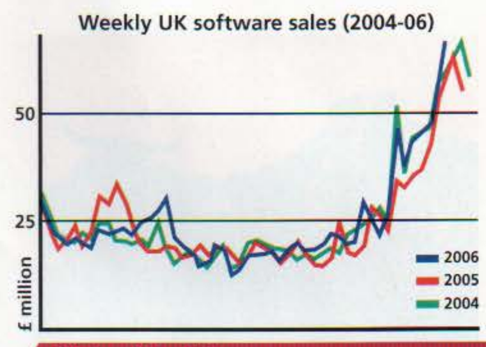
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While each of the hardware manufacturers can find reasons to be pleased with their progress so far, 2007 will mark the point at which the real competition begins.

For Sony, its focus will be ensuring PlayStation 3 manufacturing and distribution is robust enough for it to end the year with at least ten million units sold. Strengthening the halo effect with PSP, thanks to the complimentary PlayStation Network online service, will also be important.

Nintendo's efforts will concern convincing both the industry and the mass market that Wii can develop more than an innovative, short-lived niche.

But thanks to its 12-month head start, most of the attention will focus on Microsoft. Some analysts are already suggesting it will need to think seriously



State of the UK

More of the same as sales follow annual pattern

As we went to press, the official figures for UK games sales during 2006 were still being compiled. Despite a strong performance in 2004, which was only just beaten by 2005's total of £1.35 billion, the market is expected to grow again in 2006.

The effect of Wii's launch will only have been marginal to this, however. A hundred thousand-odd Wii owners buying a copy of *Twilight Princess* and *Red Steel* will have only dropped an extra £10 million of sales into December's pot. Even *Gears Of War* won't have had much effect compared to the likes of *FIFA 07, Need For Speed Carbon* and *Pro Evolution Soccer 6.* The continuing strength of DS and PSP will also have played their part. There are now around 2.5 million DS owners in the UK, while Sony expected to sell one million PSPs in the UK during 2006.

Looking at the graph (above) that tracks the UK's weekly software sales during 2004, 2005 and 2006, however, the most striking element is how similar each year's sales actually are. There are occasional peaks, such as the launch of DS in early 2005 or the striking upshift created by the launch of *GTA: San Andreas* in late 2004, but the gross behaviour of each week is controlled more by seasonal variations than specific game launches. Selling more than the year before is less about a couple of blockbusters, and more about a gradual long-term improvement.

One interesting trend to note during 2006 however is the April uplift generated by the release of *2006 FIFA World Cup Germany* into a market already riding high on the back of *Tomb Raider Legend, Football Manager 2006* and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* sales. The following World Cup months also suffer from slightly lower sales than previous years. When it comes to the end of the year however, sales are strong, especially compared to 2005.





Like other company executives, Sony America's Kazuo Hirai (far right) had a tricky year thanks to PS3 delays and shortages. He ended it with a promotion, replacing Ken Kutaragi as president of Sony Computer Entertainment



The size of the MMOG market

Because there's big money to be made online

With the announcement *World Of WarCraft* had snared its seven and a half millionth player in November, it only seemed right to run a comparative sliderule over the scale of the massively multiplayer online gaming market. For while the sales of retail MMO games and expansion packs are logged in the figures produced by companies such as Chart Track in the UK, NDP Funworld in the US and MediaCreate in Japan, the majority of revenue that's generated by such games, whether direct monthly subscription or using pre-paid cards, isn't.

Of course, one of the oft-mentioned myths mentioned in this context is the 'fact' that *World Of WarCraft*, which hogs around a half of the total MMOG subscriptions market, is a $1 billion (£508 million) business. A quick glance over the recent financials of owner Vivendi Universal Games suggests otherwise however. For the quarter ending September 30, sales were €182 million (£122 million), with profits of €24 million (£16 million), and this includes Vivendi's regular games releases such as *Ice Age* and *Miami Vice* too.

The reason that the simplistic '7.5 million players x $15 per month subscription' calculation doesn't add up is because more than half of *WOW*'s audience is situated in China. Not only do they pay a much reduced rate (about 3p per hour), but demanding an hourly rate also tends to reduce the length of playtime. Both factors have the effect of heavily reducing revenues compared to monthly US, European and Korean subscribers.

A more direct place to dig for solid figures about the size of the market is Korean MMOG publisher NCsoft. With games such as *Lineage* and *City Of Heroes/Villains*, it accounts for about a quarter of the MMOG subscription market. Total sales for its 2005 financial year were £186 million, suggesting the size of MMOG market in 2005 was less than £1 billion. This contrasts with analyst figures, which suggest the 2005 online gaming market was around $3.5 billion (£1.8 billion).

Complications with respect to methods of working out the figures include how you deal with the buying and selling of in-game assets. This is hugely relevant in some markets. For example, such person-to-person activity is thought to account for around half the Korean online games market, particularly in the case of free-to-play games which are funded through purchasing items.

The fact remains that while the MMOG market is growing fast in terms of gaining new players, converting this growth into revenue is becoming increasingly difficult. It's also extremely hard to generate consistent figures about the size of the market. Hence compared to the $35 billion (£18 billion) traditional console and PC market, it remains a niche, albeit a billion-dollar one.



With sales of over two million units since its November release, the Xbox 360-exclusive *Gears Of War* was one of the top-selling games of 2006



about how it plans to break Xbox 360 out of its hardcore hinterland. In particularly, Wedbush Morgan Securities' Michael Pachter has suggested Xbox 360 sales have lagged behind his expectations by at least 200,000 units per month in the US.

Other analysts pointed to the console's relatively high tie-ratio, with more than five games sold per console, as being symptomatic of Xbox 360's failure to expand into the mass market.

Ironically, part of the problem for Microsoft has been the speed with which it has forced publishers to drop support for Xbox and move over to 360.

> **Online is another sector where Microsoft is well ahead of the competition, with around four million gamers currently signed up with Gold membership**

Unlike Sony, which will be happy to pump PlayStation 2 hardware and software sales for years to come, Microsoft's cut and run has, at a stroke reduced 24 million Xboxes to obsolescence.

If that many PSones had been removed from the market at a similar point in the PlayStation 2 transition, a back-of-the-envelope calculation tallies the lost earnings for the industry at around $150 million. The opportunity to enthuse a younger demographic with Xbox, who in time could be converted to Xbox 360, has also been lost.

Another interesting metric for the analysts to track during the coming year will be the figures arising from Xbox Live, as online is another sector where Microsoft is well ahead of the competition, with around four million gamers currently signed up with Gold membership. At around 40 per cent of the install base, this is much better than the ten per cent of Xbox owners who paid for the service last time round. Nevertheless, it not hugely impressive as a conversion rate and as the hardcore nature of Xbox 360 owners dilutes, the company will have to work much harder to progressively add its fifth, sixth and seven million subscribers.

On a similar note, the figures for the free Nintendo wifi connection service for DS are even worse, with less than 10 per cent of 30-odd million DS owners having logged on even once. Considering its younger demographic and trickier connection method though, this isn't surprising.

More significant perhaps could be the fact that in the console space, at least, online connectivity is much less of the killer app than it was once thought to be. Of course, both Nintendo and Sony will spend tens of millions on their own online infrastructure, but this could be another area where Microsoft's advantage is less than it first appears.

Such considerations aside, what will really matter in 2007 will be the pure logistical muscle which can push millions of hardware units from Chinese factories into American, Japanese and European living rooms. So if for no other reason, the next 12 months will remind the games industry about the continuing importance of bricks and mortar retailers. And that's no joke.





The PS2, not yet abandoned in the same way as the Xbox, had a strong year, with titles such as *Final Fantasy XII* and *Guitar Hero II* selling strongly in the face of PlayStation 3's launch

A world of difference

Five big sellers from three territories with one thing in common



UK TOP SELLERS

FIFA 07 (Multi)

Pro Evolution Soccer 6 (Multi)

Need For Speed Carbon (Multi)

GTA: Liberty City Stories (PSP)

New Super Mario Bros (DS)



US TOP SELLERS
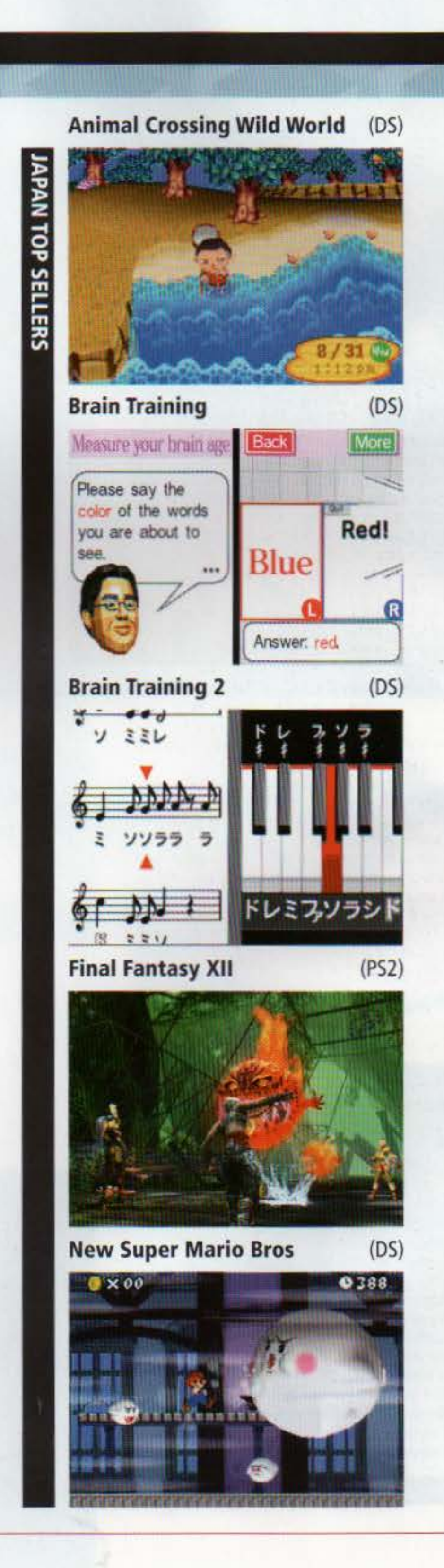
Madden NFL 07 (Multi)

New Super Marrio Bros (DS)

Kingdom Hearts II (PS2)

Gears Of War (360)

Ghost Recon: AW (360, PC)



JAPAN TOP SELLERS

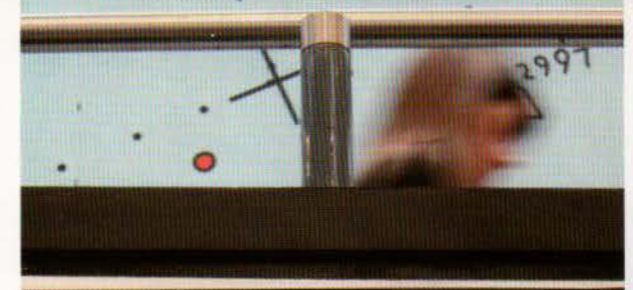
Animal Crossing Wild World (DS)

Brain Training (DS)

Brain Training 2 (DS)

Final Fantasy XII (PS2)

New Super Mario Bros (DS)





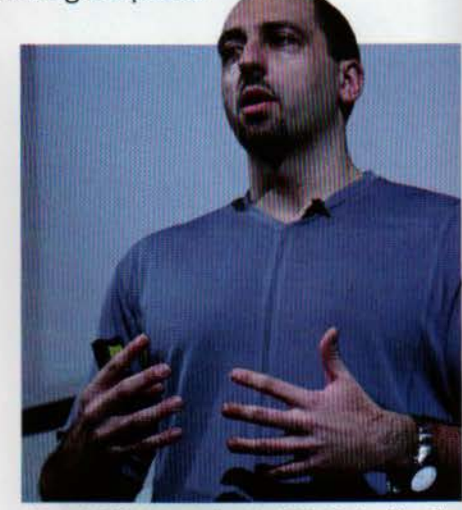
EVENT

Opening the box

With the battle for the living room still undecided, Microsoft woos bedroom coders as a cut-down XNA goes public

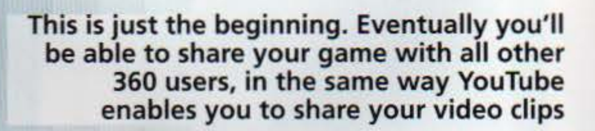
The official unveiling of Microsoft's XNA Game Studio Express was a very different affair to most software launches. The usual mixture of console raffles and free T-shirts sat slightly uncomfortably alongside technical presentations and in-depth discussions of render states or surface resolves, and the audience gathered at the University of Warwick was composed not of journalists, but students and academics. The biggest difference, however, was the changes made to XNA since its announcement at the 2004 Game Developers Conference in San Diego. Back then, XNA was, in the words of **J Allard**: "the hardware shop of game production", a development platform to unite the entire industry – and gamers "shouldn't even know that XNA exists". However, the final product has since become nothing less than "the YouTube of videogames", a platform targeted specifically at gamers themselves.

Chris Satchell, general manager of Microsoft's Game Development Group, explains the change.



Chris Satchell's faith in Allard's original 360 vision is evident. The growth of the platform into an inclusive and inspiring gaming hemisphere, both for users and creators, is foremost on his mind

This is just the beginning. Eventually you'll be able to share your game with all other 360 users, in the same way YouTube enables you to share your video clips



"J's initial vision was of transparency when moving between platforms: we've delivered on that. His next vision was: make it easier, and again we've delivered. But originally it was targeted at professional developers; what we then asked ourselves was: 'Who's supplying technology for the students, enthusiasts and bedroom coders?' We really wanted to enable these communities – we could open up the Xbox and let people program their game console!"

Available as a free PC download, XNA Game Studio Express provides a simplified toolset and extensive libraries specifically designed for the creation of games. Using Express, coders can build and debug their own titles and then, by purchasing membership of the XNA Creators Club from Marketplace (a four-month subscription costs £30, a year costs £65), export their games to the 360 to share with other members of the club. And this is just the beginning. Eventually you'll be able to share your game with all other 360 users, in the same way YouTube enables you to share your video clips.

But while YouTube has brought a small revolution to the internet, it's also caused legal

Newswire



Wii in court

It was inevitable that sooner or later someone would try to sue Nintendo over health and safety concerns in relation to accidents and injuries sustained through use of the Wii Remote. Not convinced by the fact that Nintendo has promised to replace the Remote's strap for anyone concerned about the controller getting away from them, a group of American consumers have mounted a class action lawsuit against the console manufacturer. They argue that "Nintendo's failure to include a remote that is free from defects" contradicts the company's own warranty and is therefore an unlawful practice. Although plaintiffs usually receive very little compensation for bringing class action suits, the practice remains big business for lawyers whose fees are usually settled by defendants. For that reason alone, these lawsuits look to be a regular fixture on the gaming landscape for some time to come.





The smaller demonstration titles made little effort to suggest a professional standard, but crucially didn't intimidate either





Elements of XNA's distribution infrastructure have, as Microsoft always suggested, begun permeating the dashboards of both retail and development 360s. What's reassuring is that, like Xbox Live itself, the promise and ideology of the project is being backed up at every stage by its emerging technology. How long, though, until the first games appear?









A Rare treat

Burton's boys have a Live Arcade title in the pipeline

One of the surprises hidden in Burton's discussion of the development potential of XNA was the revelation that Rare is currently working on a title for Live Arcade. While he was unable to reveal any further details beyond the fact that there is a team of less than ten people creating it, and that it should be released this year, he was happy to report that, "it feels like a Rare game," adding: "I don't know what that means exactly, but it just does."

headaches for its owners. When asked what kind of controls Microsoft is thinking of implementing when the plan finally becomes a reality, Satchell says: "We'd like to exercise as little censorship as possible. If what you've done is offensive or an obvious infringement, we'd have to do what other media outlets have done – allow people to discover it and complain." And what if it's offensive to Microsoft itself? "If you want to do anti-Microsoft content," he replies, "knock yourself out."

Satchell is adamant that, with time, anybody can learn to program XNA games, and reveals that Microsoft is already working on books for beginners. But while C#, the managed code that forms the basis of XNA, is much simpler to use than C++, it's still code, and a screen full of it is likely to prove daunting to those without any technical background.

But if it's slightly more complicated than people hoped, the plus side is that it's a lot more powerful, too. The work displayed at Warwick ranged from a simple 2D tank shooter, built with GarageGames' XNA-based Torque Game Builder, to racing and flying demos that could easily have passed for either late-generation Xbox or early 360 titles – but all made in under a month, mostly by just one person.

Nick Burton, senior software engineer at Rare, admits that his own experiences with XNA left him astonished: "There's 95 per cent of the functionality with XNA that we, the developer, get elsewhere, and you can get almost as close to the 360 hardware." Perfect for hobbyists and even small-scale start-ups working on XBLA games, Satchell confirms that the notion of a full-price boxed game made using XNA is 'entirely possible'. Equally, while Burton admits that Rare will be using C++ rather than C# systems such as XNA for the time being, he still feels that "the transference to C# and managed code is coming".

And even if it seems unlikely to bring about a revolution in development, the academic community seemed enthused. With applications for software engineering courses falling at a rate of 30 per cent every year, the quick results available through XNA seem likely to lure students in, and reduce the number of drop-outs from those who give up on coding when they find it too laborious.

When asked about the failure of similar initiatives, such as Sony's Net Yaroze in 1997 or PS2 Linux, Satchell remains upbeat, arguing that with XNA there's no need to buy new hardware (as with the former) and that the tools are well-documented and purposefully simplified (as opposed to the latter).

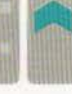
While XNA is no longer aiming to become the lingua franca of commercial game creation, the prospect of a sudden explosion in peer-created content for a major console could have a massive effect on the industry. And at the very least, the YouTube of games would be a pretty good reason to check into Live every day.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Nobody at the Microsoft end is hurrying to change the fact that you can't preview Live Marketplace's dashboard themes and Gamerpics before you buy. Considering the quality of some of them, it was only a matter of time before someone took one for the Live community and downloaded them all before putting them on a website. The clean and efficient (it mimics 360's own GUI) Dashboard Themes is sure to become an invaluable index for those with points to spend, at least until Microsoft raises an objection. A two-man show, it allows visitors to rate and comment on Marketplace content which is then sorted by rank on the front page. Thanks to this, Michael Ironside's C&C theme will likely never leave the Edge 360.

Site:
Dashboard Themes
URL:
www.dashboardthemes.com



SOUND BYTES

"Busted. Nailed. Snagged. As many of you have figured out (maybe our speech was a little too funky fresh???), Peter isn't a real hip-hop maven and this site was actually developed by Sony. Guess we were trying to be just a little too clever. From this point forward, we will just stick to making cool products."
Sony 'fesses up to its failed viral PSP marketing 'blog'

"Rare, and prior to Rare, Ultimate, are responsible for some of the best games ever made. And from an industry point of view, I hope they continue to make good games, because they're an inspiration to many of us in the business. I'm sure they'll get their groove back."
Head of Sony Worldwide Studios, Phil Harrison damns Rare with some encouragingly faint praise

"It is time to garrotte the Game Boy and paralyse the PlayStation, and it is about time, as a society, that we admitted the catastrophic effect these blasted gizmos are having on the literacy and the prospects of young males. They become like blinking lizards, motionless, absorbed, only the twitching of their hands showing they are still conscious."
Boris Johnson takes a not-very-surprising stand on videogames in the Daily Telegraph.

"Try this test: take Grand Theft Auto, a popular video game involving graphic acts of crime and killing, in one hand; in the other, take a rich, creamy macaroni cheese. Which is more likely to clog arteries?"
Daily Express columnist David Robson poses an unanswerable conundrum





INTERVIEW

Thinking small

A couple of friends, no design documents, and titles that talk to each other. Is this the future of game development?

Peter Molyneux was more than just a big name flown in to add glamour to the unveiling of XNA Game Studio Express. With his roots in bedroom coding, his patchwork back-catalogue and his persistent emphasis on creativity, Lionhead's managing director seems emblematic of the mix of ambition and unpredictability Microsoft hopes its platform will unleash. We caught up with him to discuss small teams, big ideas, and why the Acorn Atom was the greatest computer ever.

You've been able to see a lot of your own ideas make it on to the screen over the years. Given the current development landscape, do you think people entering the industry today can hope to have the kind of career that you've had?

I think these things come and go. If you'd asked me that question back in the Xbox days, four or five years ago, I'd have said, 'No, there's no way that people could survive alone. It's all about big teams making these big triple-A games'. But now the world's changed. There are sites online where you can upload your game, and people can download it and send you money. Then you've got Marketplace on the Xbox 360. Nintendo has its own version and so will PlayStation 3. So suddenly, with the new consoles here, every major platform has a way for small developers to show their stuff off. And there are lots of people working on their own, or in pairs, making real money.

Suddenly every major platform has a way for small developers to show their stuff off. And there are lots of people working on their own, or in pairs, making real money

Is that where XNA is going to fit in?

Well, if I'm a student at university and I've got a game idea, writing my own keyboard driver and all that stuff, that's a huge barrier – and that's one of the things that XNA addresses. So I think this is an opportunity for all those people out there. XNA needs to be a catalyst to make people motivated.

Is Lionhead interested in using XNA in-house too, either for prototyping or for making XBLA games?

We are. And I have a passion to feed into XNA, too. At Lionhead, we've got this thing called Concrete, which is a piece of technology we've been working on for years. It enables me to pick things out of different games and make another game. I can't go into any more details about it yet,

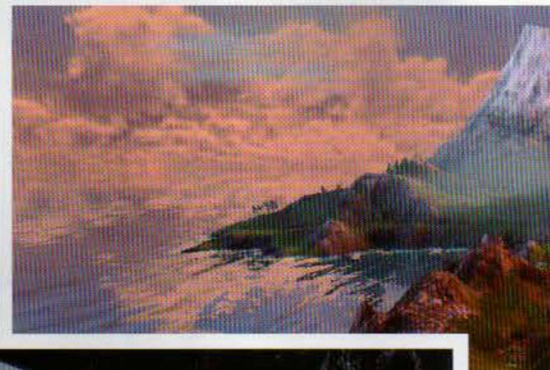


Given that its resources are largely the same as those available to professional development teams, Microsoft's hope is that XNA GSE will inspire attempts to emulate the grandest of examples





The likes of *Black & White 2* (above), *Fable* and *The Movies* have earned Lionhead a reputation for project-swallowing ambition. Perhaps their example will galvanise the creativity of XNA users





Respectfully, Molyneux chose not to use this Warwick venue as a billboard for *Fable 2* or for the announcement of his mysterious Dimitri project. In a related aside, however, he has previously confirmed that the two games will be sharing many of Lionhead's new technologies

but my hope is to actually get Concrete as part of XNA. And then I hope that XNA can act as a catalyst for another of my dreams: if we start using it to help us with some small things such as tools, we could actually end up having games communicating with each other. I used to talk to Will Wright and say: 'Look, I'm doing *Theme Park*, you're doing *SimCity* – let's have *Theme Park* talk to *SimCity*.' So if you've got *Theme Park* on your hard disk, then the park you see in *SimCity* is a little bitmap image of your actual theme park. I mean, why not? It would be so simple. The big reason it hasn't worked yet is because you're always at different places in the development cycle, so this team's at an early stage, and that team's at a late stage – but we'll do it one day.

Microsoft's final vision of XNA makes it almost seems like a game in itself – a very Lionhead kind of game. Is that part of the reason you're so interested in it?

It's funny you should say that. XNA is all about building and making things, and that's what I like about it. That's why the Acorn Atom was my ultimate machine, really: far more than the PC. Because you opened the PC up and the first thing you saw was about setting up a spreadsheet. There was nothing about me wanting to create. When you started those old machines, there was just a prompt, tempting you to type something. And the manual would say, 'If you want to make a game that does this, do it like this, and if you want to make a game that does that, do it like that.' The Atom had all that, and I think XNA is all about that, too. Within a day, you can see things moving around – that's what's so exciting.

With *Populous*, I didn't have a grand design. I just saw something and that led to something else, and that led to something else as well. I have a feeling that XNA is constructed the same way: 'Oh I see, I can have this moving around. What if I want to control this with the joypad? That's really easy, and now what if I want to do this or that?' And then, eventually, people will start to discover that they're really doing it – they're creating new things, and all by themselves.

OUT THERE



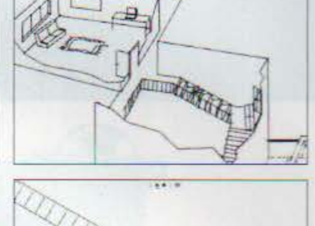
YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE

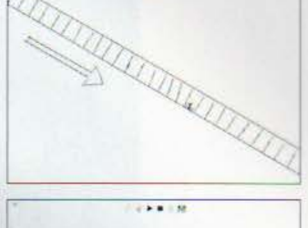
Second Life may give its players the opportunity to live out the virtual life of their dreams, but blogger Nicholas Carr has managed to chart the consequences that stewardship of a fantasy avatar can have on the real world. By deducing the amount of electricity needed to support each individual avatar (taking into consideration both the player's PC usage and Linden Labs' server usage), Carr was able to calculate that the average *Second Life* character consumes as much power annually as the average Brazilian. Even more shocking is the fact that when calculated in terms of carbon emissions, the figure averages out as being equivalent to driving a car 2,300 miles a year. Whilst it might be slightly unfair to single out *Second Life* (surely the same can be said of any server-based computer usage), the case raises several questions about how virtual gaming can impact on the ecological environment.

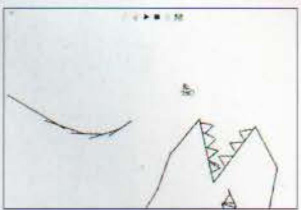
• http://www.roughtype.com/archives/2006/12/avatars_consume.php











Jagged Peak Adventure (above), by Unconed, is amongst the most complex and popular of the *Line Rider* runs on YouTube. A testament to the somewhat inward-looking community that created it, it has itself been the subject of many parodies and homages. Cadez is looking forward to working on the console versions of *Line Rider*: "I'll be working on the game – how exactly, I don't know. All my work is purely volunteer work. I just want to be involved and see how games are made in general. After all, I don't play games and have no prior development experience"



PomPom Games is amongst the most successful indie developers to find a mainstream outlet for its work. *Mutant Storm Empire* (above) is amongst the most highly-anticipated Live Arcade games, and *Bliss Island* has recently been released for the PSP



Cadez is an admirer of other indie titles, such as *Fl0w* by Jenova Chen. "It's really nice. Beautiful too. Simple concept and simple user interface, no need for any instructions or any prior gaming experience – you just play"

INTERVIEW

Downsizing

A man with no gaming or coding experience has made one of the most successful indie 'toys' yet

In a few months indie software toy *Line Rider* has moved from sketchbook to internet phenomenon – and now consoles beckon. Is this the generation that gaming gets small again?

All ideas start with a blank page. *Line Rider* doesn't go much further. The Flash-based software toy, designed by Slovenian university student **Bostjan Cadez**, turns your doodles into a downhill slope for a tiny sledder. It's slight, undemanding and hugely charming. It's also won itself a vast online community with alarming speed, and has just been sold to inXile Entertainment, developers of *The Bard's Tale*: proof yet again that small games are now big news.

"*Line Rider* came from something I used to do in primary school when I was bored," says Cadez. "I'd draw a landscape with jumps, and then draw another line representing the path of a motocross rider on the track. It hit me that, if it was fun to just imagine this, how fun would it be to watch it live?"

Cadez approached the project with a clear idea of what should be left out: "I didn't want any scoring because that promotes certain types of play and discourages others. I wanted it to be like it used to be on paper: totally free. You decide what happens by simply drawing a line."

"Games have goals and rules. Toys don't include any of those limitations. Think of the difference between Monopoly and a yo-yo"

There are currently over 11,000 *Line Rider* clips on YouTube, with tracks escalating in terms of complexity and detail. It's an indicator that, regardless of scoring, players' own competitive natures will soon find a means of expression.

Cadez remains adamant, however, that *Line Rider* is still a toy rather than a game. "Games have goals and rules. Toys don't include any of those limitations. Think of the difference between Monopoly and a yo-yo."

It's not a distinction he's alone in making. The subtle shift from games to open-ended play experiences is an increasingly important part of console manufacturers' plans. Nintendo has embraced the trend most earnestly, with the indie mash-up ethic of *WarioWare* leading the way for the DS and titles like *Nintendogs*. But the demand for such novelties is not limited to Nintendo's all-powerful handheld. All the major consoles now have an avenue for the releasing of indie games and software toys, from Xbox Live Arcade and the XNA platform, to the PS3's download service, with Jenova Chen and *Fl0w* scheduled to be the first title available.

But why are indie projects suddenly finding it easier to break into the mainstream? Part of the answer is down to the new hardware: hard drives and download services are finally providing console audiences with something PC gamers have enjoyed for years. Then there's the explosion of peer-created content online, focused around sites like YouTube and MySpace. Also, perhaps, the rise of casual titles could be yet another indicator that the market is evolving for a core audience that is getting older, with more demands on their time.

What's certain is the trend looks likely to continue. With a Casual Games Summit headed by Jeff Minter announced for this year's GDC, the beginnings of full-scale digital downloading, and the slow emergence of the mobile phone as a legitimate gaming platform, FPSes and sims are going to have to make room for new genres like doodlers and soundtoys. Who knows what cross-pollination may bring?



EVENT

Showtime at CES

As entertainment comes together on computer and console, the industry converges on Vegas

Despite its potential, Microsoft's portable media player Zune remains dedicated to basic playback. A brand first, features later philosophy seems to be in effect

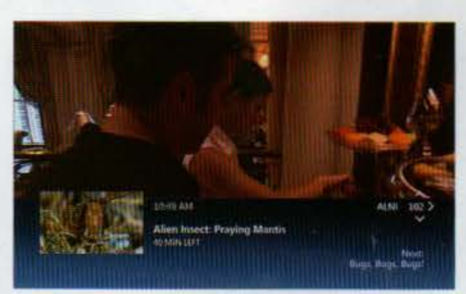


The ever-increasing connectivity options for Xbox 360 have done nothing to take Vista's eye off the critical casual sector

Even without all the fuss over E3, which recently saw the ESA's announcement of the E For All Expo consumer event, this year's Consumer Electronics Show was always going to draw gamers' attention, as the last year has pulled 360, PS3 and Wii into the home entertainment spotlight. So on January 8, the day before CES proper began, Sony spokesman Rick Clancy set the agenda: to change the event from electronics show into entertainment show.

With its predictable emphasis on 1080p and Blu-ray, Sony's keynote would have disappointed gamers tuning in for a preview of its upcoming portfolio. Only current titles occupied a dedicated 30-second segment, the remaining time shared by the company's traditional double act – media integration and hardware proliferation. PS3, it was said, has sold its first million units faster than either PlayStation or PS2, the announced goal being six million units sold by March. An upcoming media PC (with Blu-ray) and Internet Video System (with anticipated XMB interface) were also introduced.

HD-DVD was proudly announced to be leading Blu-ray in the messy HD format race – something of a proxy war between 360 and PS3



360's IPTV service looks certain to integrate into its dashboard as smoothly as previous updates, hopefully without momentarily breaking anything else. A bigger internal HDD seems inevitable

Elsewhere, however, in his tenth year as a CES speaker, Bill Gates focused on software rather than hardware. Microsoft's goal of delivering on various digital promises was reiterated, with Vista – the company's biggest ever investment – the inevitable catalyst. Described as a 'broad ecosystem' of hardcore and casual games, the Games For Windows initiative formed a natural bridge to talk of 360, with entertainment president Robbie Bach outlining plans for 2007.

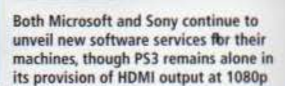
A rough total of 300 games were promised by the year's end, almost double the 160 available now. Interestingly, 360 was described as Microsoft's second leading platform. Google Earth alternative Virtual Earth 3D was shown under the control of a 360 pad, with Bach taking the moment to break down his definition of 'connected entertainment' into two parts, content and community.

Rumoured hardware changes to 360 itself, however, were left that way. An HDMI-equipped 360, dubbed Zephyr and with a 65nm processor and 120gb hard drive, earned no mention. The company later reminded online news sources that "We don't comment on speculative items." Instead, its line at X05 – to upgrade 360 via software – was partially upheld by the news of 360-based IPTV, which Redmond is surely hoping will inject life into its earlier Windows TV programme. The nascent Video Marketplace, meanwhile, should soon enjoy content from studio Lion's Gate.

The recently-released HD-DVD drive earned a passing mention, the format proudly announced to be leading Blu-ray in the messy HD format race. Though CES has always lent itself to consoles' multimedia potential, this ongoing rivalry – something of a proxy war between 360 and PS3 – does warrant concern, not least because of mixed messages regarding where the future of digital entertainment lies. Is it on the hard drive or the disc, downloaded or bought from traditional retail? For consumers, the unfortunate answer from CES appears to be both.







Both Microsoft and Sony continue to unveil new software services for their machines, though PS3 remains alone in its provision of HDMI output at 1080p

PSP enjoys a grey Christmas

Playstation portability arrives in full, much to Sony's surprise



It's not quite the debut that Square Enix would have hoped for portable *Final Fantasy VII*, but the near-total compatibility of hacked PlayStation games bodes well for the PSP's legit future

If Sony wants people to believe that hacking is no laughing matter, it should really do something about the farcical relationship it continues to share with PSP's underground community. As if the instantaneous exploitation of its 3.02 firmware wasn't enough (its security circumvented by pre-existing firmware emulation software), the yuletide antics of Hollywood-grade hacker dark_alex must have had its manufacturer wondering whether to hire him (or indeed her) or have him shot.

Having dismantled the DRM protection of PSP's recently enabled PlayStation emulator mere days earlier, dark_alex chose Christmas morning for the release of a revised custom firmware, improbably capable of running almost any dumped PlayStation image from a Memory Stick. The underlying method appears to involve duping a PSP, through modification of both game and console firmware, into believing it's running a legitimately downloaded game.

Newsgroups and similar channels were, of course, flooded with illegally distributed ISOs over the course of the following days, and the compatibility of the emulator reported to be exceptional, though less so in the case of PAL games. Presumably, this versatility would have been the object of some pride at Sony under different circumstances.

The platform holder has traditionally avoided going into detail when discussing the security of its software, on this occasion choosing to instead reiterate its stance on piracy in general. "Piracy is detrimental to the entire industry and, as a result, is detrimental to the end consumer," said a company spokesperson. "We are against piracy 100 per cent and will continue to protect our intellectual property and fight against it in all its forms."

Continue

Homebrew
Your DS needs a notepad and a drum machine

Nostalgia
The best of now and then mixed into one warm glow

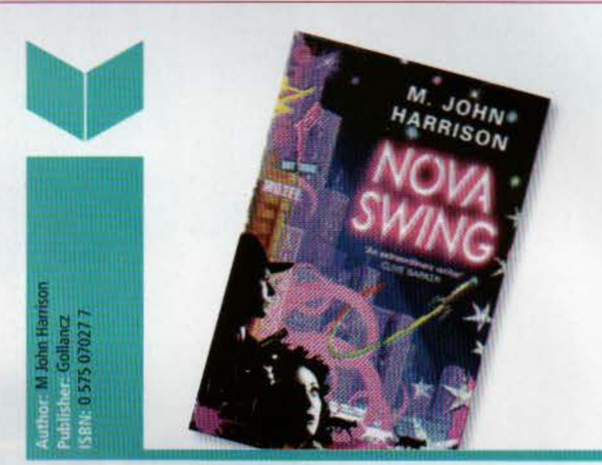
Glitches
The raw material for Buggy Saints Row: The Musical

Quit

Batteries
One size fits all, and instant recharging, please

Pain
Why can't the edges of your vision just flash red?

Quitters
Grumpy ex-smokers ruining the first week of the year



NOVA SWING

Hard sci-fi writer M John Harrison meshes noir with depth to create an unsettling emulsion

While the pace of even the best UK sci-fi writers is frenetic (witness the sub-annual refreshes of Baxter, Reynolds and Morgan), M John Harrison seems happy to work to his own metronome. It's been four years since Light, which is a long enough gap for such an intelligent writer, and Nova Swing is definitely a smart novel. It might be too smart, though. Short enough at 250 pages to make you want to ration your daily allowance, nevertheless the initial reading feels like you're only ripping through an outer layer of plastic laminate. By the end, the only thing you can think of is starting again to work out what you missed first time around. Perhaps the strangest thing, though, is its overly traditional nature. Down at heel private eye Vic Serotonin works the forbidden zone: a place full of black-and-white cats, shifting reality and a low, slow decline into madness. For whatever reasons, the tourists come to experience the strangeness. But for the cop who looks like an old Albert Einstein, something really strange is coming out of the zone. Maybe it has something to do with his dead ex-wife, whose house he increasingly haunts. But maybe it doesn't. Thrown in with a half-dozen half-cut characters – the dying Emil Bonaventure, washed-up pilot Fat Antoyne, disappointed bartender Liv Hula and underworld operator Paulie DeRaad – Nova Swing is so stripped down, it's almost meaningless. Still, it will leave you wanting more.



WRITING FOR VIDEO GAMES

Specialist game-writing book from the *Broken Sword* creative gets bogged down in publishing's long grass

The backlash against mediocre game books is in full force, with no less a figure than Peter Molyneux recently advising wannabe game designers to avoid contact with any publications that have the words 'game design' in the title. When it comes to the more specialised role of writing for games, the incantation should be even more strictly observed, it seems. Certainly, Steve Ince's Writing For Video Games falls into many a latent trap. For one thing, it takes an awful long time to get into its stride. Of course, every game book now starts with the obligatory industry 101 that strips down the role of publishers and developers, but surely we've got beyond the level of discussions of interactivity and game genres?

It's a shame because Ince, having been involved in classic narrative-driven games such as the *Broken Sword* series, should have plenty of good stuff to discuss, but the format of Writing For Video Games seems to stifle this. It's too obvious and full of conventional wisdom to be very inspiring. Chapters titled Marketing Yourself and Massively Multiplayer Online Games fill too many pages with too much baseline information that can easily be picked up elsewhere on numerous websites. Ironically then, it's not until the appendices that Ince starts to reveal some of the good stuff, with examples of sample scripts and design documentation that provide the keen games writer with real digestive meat. Otherwise, this is considerably lightweight fare.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

SSX Blur

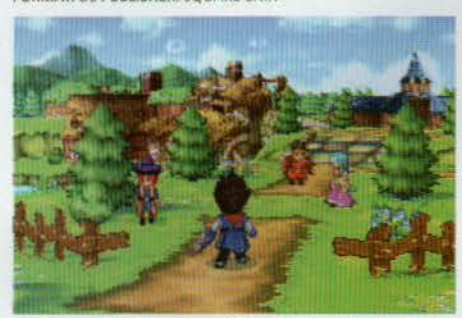
FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** EA



The series' visual dynamism carries it to Wii without a scrape, the expressive art filling in for a likely shortfall in control complexity. Is the title of Wii downhill champion changing hands already?

Dragon Quest IX

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** SQUARE ENIX



Neither wooed by Wii nor pulled along by PlayStation, Level 5's sequel rides instead into the bottomless pockets of the touch generation. Creatively improbable, yet otherwise quite inevitable

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



The advance has slowed enough to keep the Ghost squad choking on Mexican grit, but the familiarity shouldn't perturb the soldiers of Xbox Live. Here's hoping for a better regimented framerate

Aliens

FORMAT: TBA **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Gearbox and Obsidian lead Fox and Sega's revival, respectively developing an FPS bug hunt and RPG. Franchise stars are being coaxed, but will the new companion stories find time for them?

Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

FORMAT: 360, PC **PUBLISHER:** FUNCOM



The MMO's long-anticipated trek into console territory reaches Hyboria before Azeroth, Funcom's mouse-slash combat system sure to be welcomed by the analogue sticks of the 360 controller

Mercury Meltdown Revolution

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** IGNITION



As with any of the series' labyrinths, it all comes together in the end. The overdue implementation of tilt control should stave off PSP port fatigue, though a dedicated version must be the ideal

Burnout Dominator

FORMAT: PS2, PSP **PUBLISHER:** EA



EA stops straddling the generations and gives each a version of its own. It's the essence of *Burnout* that reaches PS2 and PSP, the series' new open-world engine saved for more muscular vehicles

Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI NAMCO



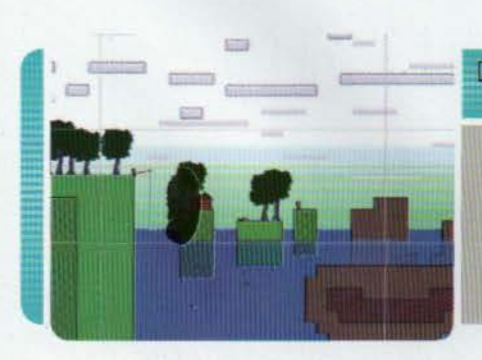
This modestly sized download hints at arcade rather than console roots, effortlessly pushing the polygon resolution to 1080p and proving popular in Japan and the US. Expect it to make UK launch

Alien Syndrome

FORMAT: PSP, Wii **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Not ideally timed, the announcement of this run-and-gun remake is asking to be misassociated with Sega's other Alien resurrection. Fans of *Shadowgrounds* and *Alien Breed* are already saddling up



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Knytt

http://knytt.ni2.se/

Follow-up to the enchanting *Within A Deep Forest*, *Knytt* is a game, so its creator – celebrated indie developer Nifflas – says, 'of exploration and atmosphere'. What sounds at first like a slightly skewed bit of Swede-lish turns out to be as accurate a summary of the game's charm as you could ask for.

A sprawling 2D wonderland of subtly animated backdrops and curiously charismatic creatures, the real star of Knytt is its world. But that's to sell the game's hero – the titular Knytt – rather short. Ruthlessly abducted from his home planet by a passing alien, a meteor strike leaves both Knytt and alien stranded until Knytt can use his ability to scramble and wall-jump to find the 11 components of their damaged UFO. There's no combat, no switches and no real puzzles to speak of, just plentiful checkpoints, pure platforming pleasure and a wonderfully soothing soundscape. Making the most of 2D's capability to deliver a real sense of scale and speed, Knytt is almost effortlessly diverting. It's hard to think of a single reason to postpone playing it.

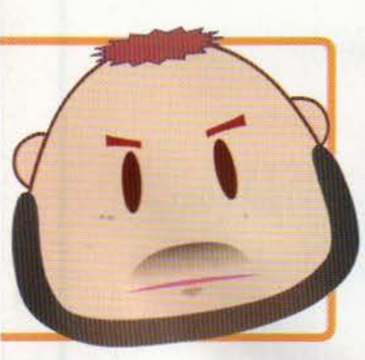


While to a passer-by the queues for the Japanese launches of Wii and PS3 must have looked similar – and similarly baffling – their make-up was quite distinct. Attach rates for hardware revealed the difference: many PS3 buyers didn't bother with any games at all, heading home to put their new machine up for auction

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

The lost generation?

Game producer Brick Bardo on the new face of the console wars



At last, both the Wii and the PS3 are on the market! Naturally, both machines sold out on day one here, which should seem like a positive thing to people in the games industry, but I couldn't help being disturbed by the overall tone of the console launches this time around – and each was troubling in its own way.

Let's start with the PS3. While it was certainly exciting to see those long queues forming in the cold night, something was wrong: in among the genuine fans, there were people queuing for the PS3 who seemed to have no real interest in gaming. There were the Asian buyers and homeless people paid to stand in line and buy consoles. Elsewhere you could see the yakuzas loading PS3s on to waiting trucks and transporting them to... where exactly? No one knows for sure, but I've been told that most of the PS3s sold in Japan could be found in stores in places such as Hong Kong, China and Thailand (at a much higher price, of course). I don't know if it's true, and I don't know how much truth there is in the rumour that small games shops were forced to place orders for hundreds of games in order to get just one PS3 to sell, but it's still worrying.

I can't help feeling that one thing is certain: most of the people buying the PS3 did so in order to sell it on at a higher price. In response to this, auction sites reported that fake bids have been flowing in to scupper these sales. A lot of sites are now filled with PS3s that are simply not selling that well.

The result is that a very small number of the units sold at launch really ended up in the hands of genuine gamers. From a developer's perspective, this is quite annoying, to say the least. Our objective is for as large an audience as possible to be able to enjoy our games, so when gamers can't even buy the console, there's clearly a big problem. It seems to me that before getting concerned about the content of a title or its rating, the first priority of the hardware manufacturers should be to ship their consoles to the consumers safely and in sufficient numbers, while preventing the machines from finding their way on to the black market. Looking back, I can't think of any other platforms that have started off with such a negative image.

Now, let's look at the Wii, which faces a different kind of problem. While the launch seems to have gone relatively well, despite the usual shortages, I've been hearing worrying reports about what happened when people got their consoles home. I'm sure you've read this too: stories about the remote ending up buried in the TV screen, or sticking out of a broken window. In the US, court actions have been threatened, and Nintendo has been forced to react with offers of stronger wrist straps for their controller.

> **The first priority of the hardware manufacturers should be to ship their consoles to the consumers safely and in sufficient numbers, while preventing the machines from finding their way on to the black market**

From a Japanese point of view, it's hard to understand the court actions in the US: a warning message appears when the console is switched on, and most games are filled with screens telling people how to use the remote safely. As a developer, it's frightening to think I have to remember that there are people ready to sue me



To Sony loyalists, the news that the follow-up to *Dragon Quest VIII* (below right) was to be a DS exclusive must have been heart-breaking. The series has always followed the leader, through, defecting from NES and SNES to PlayStation and PS2 in 2001

for anything when I start to make a game! And yet, making titles just for them, without exploiting the unique nature of the Wii's controller, strikes me as being meaningless.

The really interesting news for a game developer like me, however, is the number of games people were buying alongside their new consoles. The first week's figures are in, and they're quite intriguing, even if the decimal places do make them seem a little strange: 0.9 games were sold on average for every PS3, while the ratio for the Wii was 1.8 games per console. Amazon Japan announced a higher ratio of 2.3 for every PS3 sold and 6.0 for the Wii. The attach rate at launch may not have much to say about the future of a platform, but it seems like there's already a huge gap appearing between the two machines.

But amid all the confusion and strife clouding the recent console launches, there's at least one clear indicator of where the real success story is, as Square Enix has announced that *Dragon Quest IX* will be a Nintendo DS exclusive. So for the time being, in Japan, a clear winner has been named – and it's a handheld platform. There really are strange times ahead...

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Pokémon Diamond / Pearl



It's hard to imagine pining for anything as omnipresent as *Pokémon*, but it seems like a long, long time since catching 'em all took up all of your time
DS, NINTENDO

Rogue Galaxy



It's already been a long wait for one of the last great gems in the PS2's crown to reach Europe, and there's still many months to go – but who can resist space cowboys?
PS2, SCEE

Stranglehold



Could there be a better tomorrow for the thirdperson shooter? The sublime control system, rich UE3 visuals and teahouse-shattering physics are intent on ruling it out
360, PS3, MIDWAY

Internet connection required

Truly online consoles: are we there yet?



Japan liked it enough to make it its number one PS3 game, but the nature of *MotorStorm*'s US absence suggests that what's been seen (and bought) so far is little more than preview code. If its not online, it seems, it's simply not enough

The oddness of *MotorStorm*'s Japanese release says more about console gaming than how big the muscles and brains of its hardware have become.

Unlike *Test Drive Unlimited*, it isn't a game built to be played online, or even necessarily to be played against human competition. Its AI does an excellent job of aping genuine malice, and in structural terms its festival atmosphere is entirely superficial. Yet in Sony's eyes its Japanese build is unworthy of western release: it simply isn't enough for a platform which, when it comes to feeling naturally online, ticks almost every box.

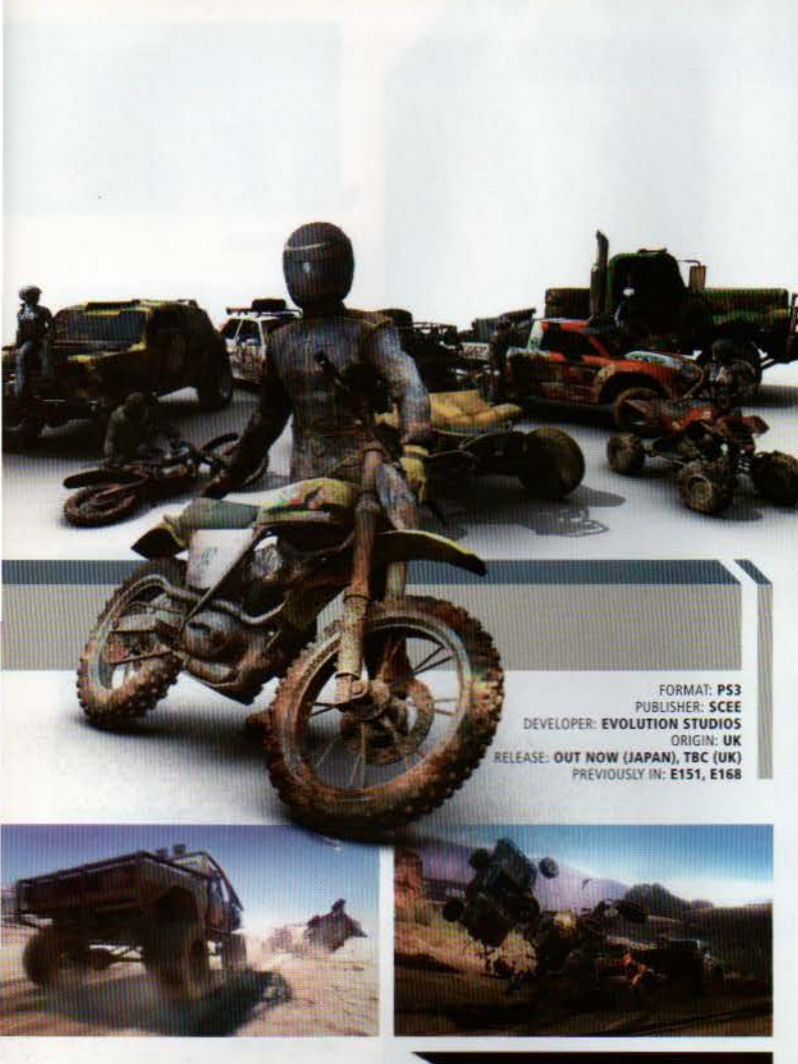
While Xbox Live is clearly the superior architecture – its agenda is more tangible, its approach sure and its interface exquisite – PSN has a broader focus that's classically Sony. Granted, it's followed 360's example almost every step of the way (or so it seems), but cheekily enough it's become the first to implement that long-standing Microsoft ideal of plug and play.

Thanks in no small part to its falling anvil of a price tag, PS3 might also find itself the first console for which a majority of its users – a vast majority, even – are online willing and able from the start. After all, when you spend this much on the package, hard drive equipped and free to play online, you're inclined to want it all.

Rather than the obvious question of how big Sony's sabre now becomes, it's worth asking what environment PS3, together with the precedent being set by *MotorStorm*, can create. If this really is the cusp of ubiquitous online involvement, then who are tomorrow's players?

Will this mark the end of the hardcore academy model of online community, whereby price of admission and technical demands conspire to create an often quite inhospitable place? Will the audience finally become large enough to stop exemplary online titles becoming ghost ships as those with disposable incomes continue their relentless hop between the latest releases?

Or is Sony no more empowered in this regard than Microsoft? Is it actually down to retailers to tear down their preowned shelves and reinstate values of commitment to the games people buy? Or is it, rather boringly, still just a question of time? Have the stars of HD, broadband, superpowered gaming yet to align?




FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **EVOLUTION STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E168**

MotorStorm

Evolution's dark cloud of anger drifts first to Japan, where the forecast is anything but grim

When you've followed the rules for as long as Evolution Studios, there's every chance that when you decide to break a few, you end up breaking them all. The MotorStorm festival, a gleeful blasphemy to the holy lands of Monument Valley, is in this sense also a valuable launch title – the kind of bucking bronco that tramples both creative and technical barriers with nary a thought for its own well-being. Suitably animalistic, its vehicles claw across precipitous rocks, leave lasting scars in deformable terrain, belch nitrous until they blow themselves right across a rich 5.1 soundscape, and scramble over one another in mesmerising orgies of Havok physics.

Its races, divided into thematically apt tickets of four, visit eight venues in all, though calling them something as routine as 'courses' feels disingenuous. Perhaps 'habitats' would serve them better – natural landscapes of interweaving plateaus and basins that offer each vehicle class its own unique optimum route. Big rigs – great battering rams of mobilised metal – plough inexorably through the trenches, quietly hoping for an errant buggy, or better still a bike or quad, to slip from its haven of overhanging dust and rock. Mud pluggers and racing trucks enjoy an all-terrain roam that sees them swerve unpredictably between the roles of predator and prey, while rally cars do their best to scramble between the breakneck flatlands.

It's been a fascinating dynamic to watch as it evolves. The troubled framerate has, at the 11th hour, quickened to a frantic clip. The mud has matured from candyfloss and chocolate into something satisfyingly real. A handling model once remarkable for its weight has gained an expressive twitchiness. The rubber band AI has tightened to keep the action close, camouflaging itself against the backdrop of chaos. And one of the best internal steering models since *Wipeout* has rightfully stepped to the forefront of the game's driving discipline.

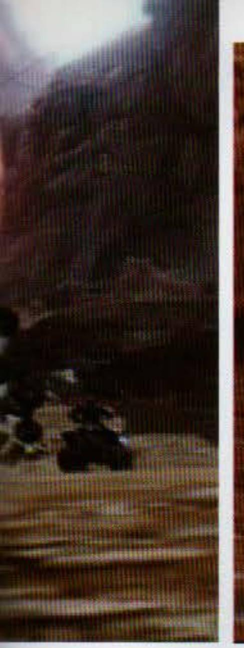
And it's all appreciable after just seconds of play. Though heavily improvised by procedural AI, *MotorStorm*'s action never requires you to make that choice between seeking either victory or indulgent pleasure, its interspecies brawl providing every advertised spark of mayhem, and then some without provocation. Better than the corkscrew of wreckage that characterises *Burnout Revenge*, or the random firework displays of *Full Auto*, its peripheral action is an unending gag reel of cause and effect, AI drivers overcooking their boosts, playing the






Though much is missing from the Japanese release, Evolution has at least thrown in some novelties. Aerial HD helicopter footage of Monument Valley (above left) is a genuine treat, as is the pause mode camera that reveals surprising, though not always flattering, details. Vehicle cockpits, for example, are otherwise inaccessible

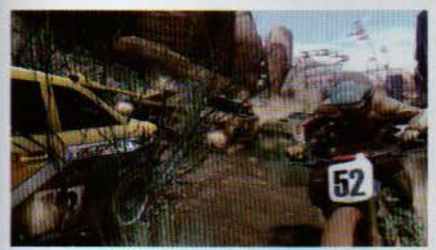






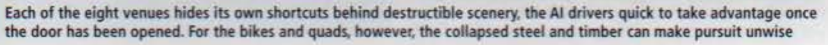
The vaunted abuse button is as tempting a control as you'd imagine, honking the horn at a distance and triggering lewd gestures up close. Better still, the AI seems twice as happy to use it as you do, often at its own expense











Each of the eight venues hides its own shortcuts behind destructible scenery, the AI drivers quick to take advantage once the door has been opened. For the bikes and quads, however, the collapsed steel and timber can make pursuit unwise



Contrary to earlier indications, *MotorStorm* does indulge in the occasional night-time or fogbound race during later stages. The effect on racing strategy speaks for itself, but the lack of headlights suggests a hurried addition

schoolyard bully, gesturing wildly at each other with middle fingers or blaring their horns, and generally letting their single-minded antagonism drive them full pelt into rock-faced oblivion.

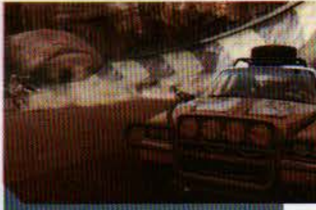
Experienced all at once, it begs the question of just how much the racing dynamic, with all its delicate balances, can actually withstand. Yet behind the kamikaze exterior, *MotorStorm* has pulled off a complex balancing act, granting the player enormous latitude for error and taking it upon itself to ensure that nothing feels unduly harsh or lenient. You can crash over a dozen times and still win the toughest of its events, with time added on for ill-advised shortcut attempts and procedural acts of God. That said, affording the luxury requires dedication elsewhere. Boosting – an all-important technique metered only by the temperature of your engine – is a deceptively fine art, its effectiveness influenced by everything from terrain type and vehicle pitch to scrapes against opposing metalwork.

Not unlike *Mario Kart*, *MotorStorm* tends to award victory based on an average of skill and good fortune. This makes it a hugely accessible experience with no apparent sense of duty towards the hardcore, even acting with downright hostility towards those who take it too seriously. The valley will happily let a pebble flick a car out of first place metres before the finish, and in appreciating the need to give the game both attitude and teeth, Evolution has also given it a tendency to bite. While its clever configurations of vehicle classes ensure that each race develops its own identity – a pack hunt setting the big upon the small, for instance – difficulty within tickets can spike and slump, at worst serving victory on a platter to the one car that breaks early from the ruckus. And still, after months spent smoothing angles and patching seams, there are the occasional barbs in otherwise smooth racing lines – obstacles impossible to avoid or even see.

Behind the kamikaze exterior, MotorStorm has pulled off a complex balancing act, granting the player enormous latitude for error without feeling unduly harsh or lenient

But if you want to find one overarching cause for complaint, you may as well choose the mere existence of this Japanese release. This premature, singleplayer-only build may qualify as one of the most complete incomplete games around, but Monument Valley can be quite uncanny given just a handful of visual flaws. Alpha blending issues and shimmering shadows are the worst, and it's a shame, though an understandable one, to find that the price of a smooth framerate has been an apparent drop in particle count.

While there's also a chance that the western version – dare it be said, the proper one – will end up feeling modularised rather than complete thanks to its double deadlines, there's little discouraging about what it's achieved so far. *MotorStorm* is a classic, Psygnosis-era SCEE game – a precious discovery at a time when many of its parent company's early values are being lost in the HD scrum. Furthermore, it's a reminder that when the most advanced technology is piled, with both vision and a vengeance, into the most basic of thrills, there's little that can stand in its way.



Distant thunder

With its class rivalries matrix lending itself so perfectly to an online brawl, *MotorStorm* demands that we ask Evolution what it's safe to expect of the western release. "Naturally our major focus is multiplayer," confirms senior designer Simon Barlow. "We've got 12-player online games running and are aiming to ramp it up to 16. Without the need for AI, we can increase the options so players can customise vehicle palettes and visual elements. The plan is to continue expanding the game, not only with multiplayer but with new modes, and non-gameplay things such as screenshot sharing. We hope to have content ready to add to the game from launch, although I should stress that this is all in the prototyping phase and isn't guaranteed."

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER/ARTOON**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (US, UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164, E170**

Blue Dragon

An RPG that fills a yawning hole in 360's line-up, but may lead to some players simply yawning



***Blue Dragon*'s opening dozen or so hours struggle to feel scenic next to *Dragon Quest VIII*. The overworld is its least glorious moment, while the narrow confines and lucid colour choices of its cavern-type dungeons (above) make them its most affecting**



Field Skills steer the game away from turn-based battles somewhat, simply by turning you away from them – the Bari-barrier, for example, allows you to instant-kill certain enemies you walk into, earning you skill-type exp points with each kill



If you're aiming to capture the attention of traditional RPG players who have never felt the need to so much as sniff a 360, a game's success could just as easily be measured by how many players it can repel as by how many it can attract. *Blue Dragon*'s opening is like water torture for those who have fallen out with the genre: an intro segment hands control back and forth to the player like pass the parcel, alongside some brazenly bland turn-based battles and incessant dialogue-scenes prompted by every little event. But while those anti-hooks are present and correct, it does something equally predictable within the next five or so hours: proves itself to be more interesting than it first appears.

Those signature shadows – chiselled, dark blue monster forms sprouting from the feet of the game's protagonists – are soon introduced to battles, manifesting and looming behind your characters as their turn comes around. Fights, despite their turn-based pace, are a restless sight, each giant leaping to attack with movements mimicked from its owner, alongside a picture-in-picture window profile of the character and a camera that tracks with each attack and flips during critical hits and killing blows. Character and enemy turns are shown in a queue at the top of the screen, which also displays your forthcoming turns with regards to a particularly critical upcoming moment. Allies and foes can fight from two separate fields – front and back – with the latter restricting you from performing physical attacks, but also protecting you from those of your opponents, a haven for any characters employed as buff-specialists.

Outside of battle, combat strategy becomes more interesting, and surprisingly friendly. Enemies are fully visible, meaning no random battles; pressing the trigger expands a ring of influence around your party, allowing you to select which enemies to engage directly. It also allows you to take on several groups in a single fight, in sequence, with each defeated group resulting in a 'Trance' status bonus for the next group you'll face. And as well as being avoided, enemies can also be defeated without having to step into the turn-based arena; a number of MP-sapping 'field effects' are available, from bombs that paralyse enemies to set

Fights, despite their turn-based pace, are a restless sight, each shadow leaping to attack with movements mimicked from its owner and a camera that flips during killing blows



Each shadow form is assigned a skill – power, assassin, monk, white/black magic and more – that unlock abilities as each is ranked up. These powers can then be equipped under any other skill type, but available slots are few







Blue Dragon's rendering of its characters – think unblemished fudge – is rather hit and miss. Some are just so peculiar that they can't help but be striking, such as giant prawns in suited armour, or a mysterious salesman (below) clad in gas mask and tracksuit



Finder's fee

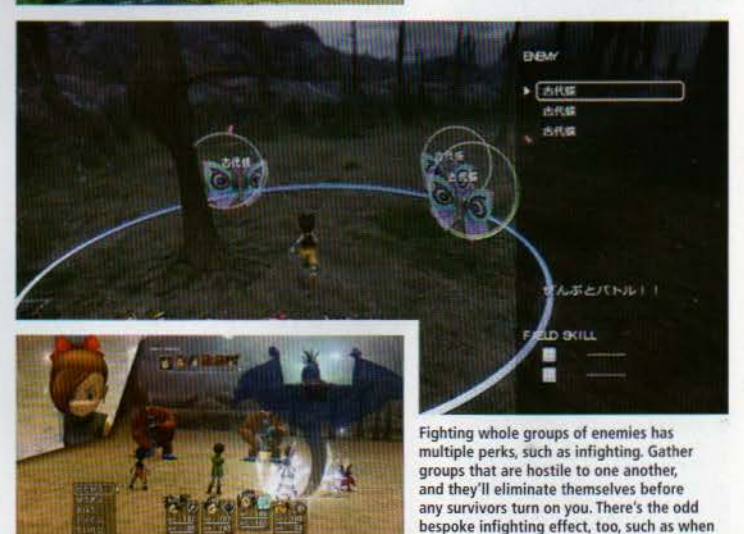
In an unexpected touch that's either a fanfare or knell depending on how compulsively you play, *Blue Dragon* takes the concept of RPG housebreaking to a new extreme. You can run up to virtually every object in an environment – usually most profitably in homes and villages, and least when exploring the overworld – and search it, unearthing a small amount of gold, an item, a HP/MP boost or even minor stat bonuses. It may sound like the lazy rebirth of 'running up to everything and pressing A' game design, but if it's not approached too diligently – and may not need to be, given the seeming slightness of the rewards involved – it serves as a neat distraction, but quickly becomes a dumb grind if you're determined to rummage through anything that crosses your path.

them up for back-attacks to a barrier that kills enemies you've previously beaten. Warp points across the world, once opened, are reachable at virtually any time; characters killed in battle are revived once the fight is done; boss battles are preceded by a soft checkpoint, so if you find yourself trampled, you can return to the moment just before the battle, escaping to bank your exp and make some plans. Sticking points in RPGs can often turn to quicksand, culling significant play time or even forcing a restart from an earlier save, enough to turn you away permanently – *Blue Dragon* is, at least, a determined effort to abolish this kind of mortal snagging.

Reach the end of *Blue Dragon*'s first disc (of three) and, fundamentally, it's been a game whose combat centres on babysitting the A button, pulling you through its world along a knotted string of fields, dungeons and camps. It feels very deliberately aimed, but not cynical with it, and its first party production values mark it out among the very few now-gen entries into the RPG genre. And it's perfect timing, perhaps, to beckon those *Final Fantasy* fans left slightly dizzy in between *XII*'s iconoclastic direction and *XIII*'s gestation, fans who, if nothing else, will feel highly qualified to pass judgement on *Blue Dragon*.

RPGs are rarely any good at seduction, their first impressions often clouding the reward and bigger-picture perspective offered to the more determined or patient players, a rule that *Blue Dragon* seems content to obey. But it does have that high-profile trio of aphrodisiacs to write press releases home about, which have delivered to certain extents. Sakaguchi's Mistwalker studio has been seemingly successful in guiding Artoon's ambitious but notoriously shaky hand and Nobuo Uematsu has provided a typically classy soundtrack, but while Akira Toriyama's character designs are better rounded and more corporeal than in *Dragon Quest VIII* – part style choice, part HD benefit – they're much less vivid, despite bizarre and garish highlights. And so, despite Blue Dragon's initial conservatism, it soon intrigues, its combat flourishes and greater accessibility bolstering, rather than reconstructing, a conventional approach. And, as a consequence, it stands a much better chance of converting RPG fans to the 360, than 360 fans to the RPG.





Fighting whole groups of enemies has multiple perks, such as infighting. Gather groups that are hostile to one another, and they'll eliminate themselves before any survivors turn on you. There's the odd bespoke infighting effect, too, such as when fire and ice wolves attack one another

The crowds are thicker, and the camera framing – especially throughout Kansai – presents some hyperactive backdrops, but there's still a momentary stutter of loading at each street corner. The painfully brief audio loops from the first game have been improved upon, but can still sound canned.



Ryu Ga Gotoku 2 extends the original's suite of minigames with bowling, the opportunity to maintain your own hostess bar and a non-mini golf driving range with targets to hit





Ryu Ga Gotoku 2

Double the turf and double the dragons, as PS2's most respectful gangster works a new stomping ground

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (US, UK)**

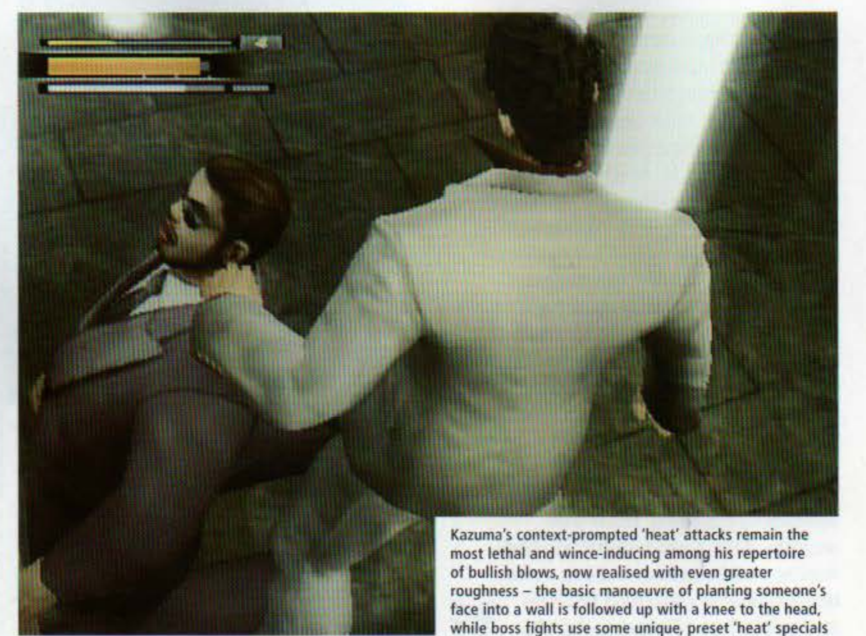
With the dragon having bested the carp (back tattoos, at least, allow a summary of the first game with a minimum of spoilers), Kazuma Kiryu's plan to leave his yakuza family to its own business while he finds a peaceful early retirement is a scheme too cunning for even Japan's best-dressed gangster to pull off. After an extended preamble that's several cutscenes deep, the game itself opens in a graveyard with Kazuma paying respect to the casualties of the first game, each headstone offering a refresher cinematic from the previous outing. Soon he's joined by Terada, current head of Kazuma's former clan and, one goon-ambush shootout later, the 'Dragon of Dojima' is once again stalking his way through the sleazy streets of Kamurocho, the original game's barely-veiled take on a real-world red-light district in Shinjuku, Japan.

And it's not long before Kazuma steps from this familiar dragon's den to another, in travelling to Kansai, a new location whose map is slightly smaller than that of Kamurocho, but whose bustle and urban racket is thoroughly familiar. If anything, it's an even more impressive neon rainforest than the original district, its buildings footed by outrageously showy shop fronts, and slathered with electric billboards, and it's here that Kazuma meets Ryuuji Gouda, Kansai's very own dragon. But it's not Kansai that takes up the game's two discs, it seems, but the cutscenes; once again, they're simply but attentively and powerfully produced, each character's face detailed enough to offer its own lucid personality. They're numerous and extensive, and skipping is allowed – but hardly recommended.



Lengthy cinematic sequences now occupy a majority of the time spent tackling a particular chapter of the story, but the option to skip is offered. Now spanning two discs the localisation department will have its work cut out just to match the acceptable western dub of the original

If the game's non-playable moments ask more, its combat asks less thanks to a twofold increase in speed; it's not just Kazuma himself that feels swifter but, crucially, the load time for each fight is now a fraction of that of the first game. Changes in direction are allowed during a combo – nimbly and with plenty of reach – but don't let that fool you into thinking that Kazuma has found some grace. This is still an unceremonious, hammer-time brawl full of fists, feet and flying furniture, and camera shudders accompany every agonising moment face/concrete contact. It's not enough sophistication to raise it above arcade-scroller bashing, but does massage out some annoyances. It sums up a game that, in terms of content, is very much the model of a annual-turnaround sequel, but in continuing its potently told story, it offers more than just refinement for those successfully persuaded by the original.



Kazuma's context-prompted 'heat' attacks remain the most lethal and wince-inducing among his repertoire of bullish blows, now realised with even greater roughness – the basic manoeuvre of planting someone's face into a wall is followed up with a knee to the head, while boss fights use some unique, preset 'heat' specials



Amusement's vision

In among the *VF5* cabinets, playable UFO catchers and sadly non-playable photo booths, the Club Sega building also offers a game of '*YF6*'. Developed by 'MA2' – the gag completed with a cute parody of a logo – the game itself could be yet another pun: virtual fighting. Played in firstperson, in cyberspace, it's a one-on-one arena battle with sci-fi clubs, blocks, knockdowns and a dash move that can send you over your opponent's head to attack from behind. It takes just a few rounds of combat for the idea to start feeling strained, but it could serve as the perfect release for anyone frustrated by some of the more restrictive camera angles that remain in this sequel's 'real' fights.





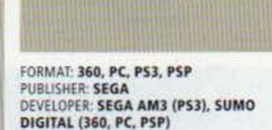
Still reluctant (or unable) to take that last step into full-blown realism, *Virtua*'s courts continue to lack an engaging human aspect, with players able to pass right through line judges or play shots from behind them





Virtua Tennis 3

Sony's move into motion-sensitive gaming is welcomed onto the court by Sega's racqueteer



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SEGA AM3 (PS3), SUMO DIGITAL (360, PC, PSP)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN/UK**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

With a foundation of cleanly efficient gameplay and an appealingly light-hearted personality, *Virtua Tennis* is still a great entertainer. Post-Dreamcast editions have seen new features, but even on new generation formats the core remains largely untouched. While the biggest introduction for this third outing is confined to PlayStation 3, its use of Sixaxis' motion-sensing abilities steers clear of turning the controller into a makeshift racquet, ala *Wii Sports*, opting instead for an altogether different approach.

With tilt control selected, *Virtua Tennis* is more akin to a marble-rolling puzzle toy, or a *Super Monkey Ball* offshoot: with you 'willing' the ball to the opposite corner by rolling the pad in that direction. Initially, it's a disaster; eventually it becomes usable. But the system has a strange brain-twisting effect in that the more you become accustomed to it, the harder it is to explain the method behind the on-screen athletics.

Moving is a simple matter of tipping the pad, as, to a certain degree, is performing a shot. But actually returning the ball requires an odd suspension of usual gaming instinct. Think too much and you'll likely fail to produce the shot you want, suggesting it to be a perfect field-levelling choice for blooding newcomers or post-pub multiplayer antics. Overall, however, it makes for clumsy play, with players all too often diving for out-of-reach balls rather than moving toward them. Though that's not to say the experiment isn't worthwhile.

Other additions take more conventional form. Stadia in 360, PS3 and PC versions boast a pleasing array of working digital readouts and slick, bright visuals, although *Virtua Tennis 3*'s faces are capable of looking truly hideous, bearing more of a resemblance to waxwork rejects than the intended personalities. More interestingly, the game's World Tour mode is enhanced with a new Tennis Academy, together with a fresh wave of tremendously inventive minigames.

The Tennis Academy works much like the training minigames in previous titles, with successes increasing your player's abilities. However, with three levels of difficulty and a range of tasks for each level – 'Perform three backhands,' 'Serve four lobs,' 'Smash five volleys,' – all against an AI opponent rather than an amusing prop, it's very much all work and no play. Throughout your World Tour career you may also run into other pros, who will email suggestions for practice matches outside of tournament conditions.

Prolonged play uncovers one truly unwelcome change, the series' constants of poise and balance undermined here by an air of inexactness, particularly troublesome in minigames where placement of every shot is crucial. But if Sega can make even PSP feel precise, as in *VT World Tour*, the chances of it finding its form before this game's opening volley must be good.





Sega's imagination shines in minigames that take every liberty with the sport's tactics and environments. As with the recent *Top Spin 2*, advanced physics play a major role





PS3 code is at a more advanced stage, which would explain why the 360 build lacks the same clarity. Final comparisons, however, should be too close to call





Triumph in miniature

***Virtua Tennis 3*'s fourplayer minigames are already brimming with potential. The ten-pin bowling service challenge will be familiar, but the newer inventions provide such engrossing multiplayer action it'd be easy to shun traditional matches altogether. A memorable example has you dodging boulder-sized tennis balls while collecting fruit, the game's physics modelling the bounce of a pineapple with hypnotic grace. However, it can't match the insanity of the minigames confined to the World Tour, one incredible highlight seeing you protecting several meat chops from three tethered cartoon-crocodiles by whomping the fans they are attached to with volleys.**



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **REAL TIME WORLDS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 23**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164, E167**



One of the first gang bosses died while we were shooting her bodyguards. For some, that may be game-breaking, but it shows the game's capacity for emergence, and the carpet bomb of explosives it can fling around

Crackdown

Purge the city of crime bosses in this bare-bones reinvention of the free-roaming action genre

The lack of ceremony in *Crackdown* is shockingly brave, although it may just feel plain shocking to some. There are no cutscenes here, no waffle, no double-crosses to foreshadow, no love interest, minimal customisation, no formal training course, no colon in the title... Off you go into Pacific City, known only as a justice-enforcing 'Agent', with the voice of a disembodied adviser as your only company. As far as free-roaming action games go, this is one that adheres very closely to that definition.

As a refresher from our last *Crackdown* coverage (see **E**167), your sole goal is to eliminate the city's 21 crime lords, each one in place at their particular HQ from the word go. There's a difficulty gradient – and taking out certain bosses first will weaken others – but the order is up to you. You can cultivate your five key attributes (agility, gunning, explosives, strength, driving) by completing challenges or killing criminals in particular ways. And that's all you need to know: a bare-bones preamble to suit the game's tone.

One thing quickly becomes clear: as far as improvements in character movement and combat go, *Crackdown* is a league above *Saint's Row*, in the manner that *Saint's Row* was a league above *GTA: San Andreas*. The scale and range of combat effectiveness, especially with regards to lock-on and explosives, are pinnacles for the crime-centric city-sim. But something else soon becomes apparent: after just seven hours of play with the preview code, all but four of Pacific City's crime bosses had been wiped off the map, which includes sufficient downtime to find enough agility orbs to max out the attributes. This isn't a criticism, more a warning for those expecting a futuristic *GTA 3.5* – *Crackdown* has been made, it seems, for players who like to truly *play* with the game world, not for those who like to treat it as a day job.

There are handfuls of race challenges and a 300-strong secret token collection, both offering ability upgrades, but further diversions need to come from you. At which point, you could turn to the Achievements, the game-wide Live co-op mode or the boss-rush Time Trial mode for some guided skill goals, new tactics or refined ones respectively. Plenty of games offer similar features for these very reasons, but few need to depend so heavily on them – or are so suited to them. We'll see just how well they, and the rest of Pacific City, stand up to that particular pressure in next month's review.



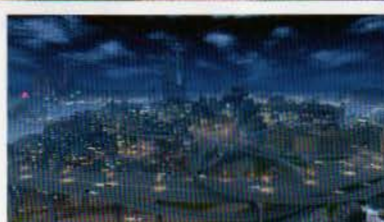
Height club

Though *Crackdown*'s verticality may be familiar to those who've played *Spider-Man 2* and *Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*, there's more to it than just leaping tall buildings in a single button-press. The clambering aspect, allowing you to hold on to window ledges and other outcrops, means that even the tallest construction can often be scaled, somehow or other. The optional trek to the top of the Agency Tower, the tallest construction in Pacific City, is a vertiginous one, asking riskier leaps the higher you go, the stuff of standout *Tomb Raider* memories. The search to collect agility orbs – scattered visibly around as you look out from a rooftop – can lead to you skipping across whole districts without ever seeing a civilian, and goad you into some inventive scrambling.





Each district's bosses can be found simply through exploration. The Agency broadcasts intel about each leader, including the chance of takedown success, as you approach their hideout. If you don't go looking, the game will eventually throw you a boss location to get you started





Dead gangsters drop puddles of colour-coded orbs, which are automatically collected. The colours refer to which skill, or combination of skills, were used to take each out



Supply drops offer a respawn point and more ammo. The starting armoury is slim, but gang guns picked up and returned here can be kept





FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ASCARON**
DEVELOPER: **NADEO**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **MARCH 16**

TrackMania United

The owners, mapmakers, artists and film directors of Nadeo's world finally come together under a United banner

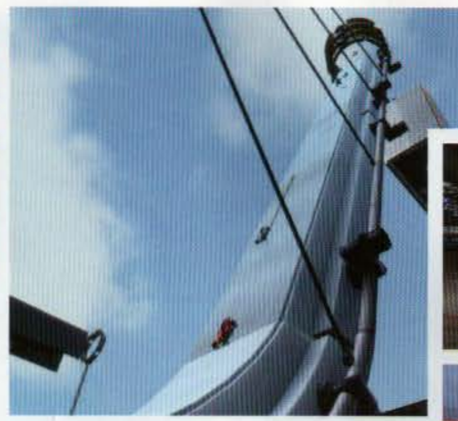
It's been said before of *TrackMania*: differences between its latest game and the last one aren't that major. Indeed, a glance at *TrackMania United* gives the classic impression of a greatest hits compilation, its foremost brag being the assembly of every game environment from the original game, its *Sunrise* sequel and the e-sports phenomenon *Nations*. Beyond the convenience of the single package, for veterans there's the added sweetener of having extra building blocks with which to lay and decorate track, together with new Nadeo-produced solo campaigns. And then there's the equivalent of the 'Digitally Remastered' stripe – an extra layer of detail and gloss to draw in top-spec PC owners.

But this is all incidental. Nadeo's toy racer has never prided itself on substance so much as potential – the ability of its tools and community to fashion all the content it could ever need. A milestone in *TrackMania's* evolution into a so-called 'internet 2.0' game, *United* is a complete platform for its hobbyist clientele. Though its rather fragile frontend continues to yell homebrew, what lies beyond is an intimidating online suite. An in-game browser called ManiaLink provides a worldview of user-generated content (tracks, cars, mods, etc) and the option to focus in on the custom homepages of specific members of its already vast society.

At a time when consoles are jostling for recognition as definitive online hubs, *United* is just what the PC needs, a show of intimidating strength and scale. Its races may continue to represent little more than time trials, vehicles clipping gracefully through each other rather than colliding, but they keep its competitions friendly and clean. In a game where loves of sharing and creation are the minimum requirements, it's hard to imagine a better set of rules for the road.



Motion blur, specular highlights and widescreen resolution support promise to gang up on PCs suffering delusions of grandeur. But while *United* can be made to chug on the most powerful hardware, its lesser detail settings and window mode can alternatively make it an ideal desktop companion



For both designers and puzzle mode players, the instant switch from mouse-driven editor to realtime racing is still validation enough of Nadeo's PC exclusivity

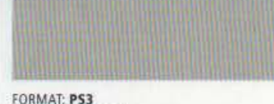




TrackMania continues to operate a strictly virtual economy, its currency of 'coppers' not only ensuring that players enjoy its races as much as its toolset, but also placing a tangible value on the fruits of their creativity

Gran Turismo HD

The Real Driving Simulator leads Sony's charge for substance and quality in downloadable content



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**
DEVELOPER: **POLYPHONY DIGITAL**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Gran Turismo has always divided opinion like oil and water, but *GT HD* ought to help heal the divide with a simple solution – by being free. American and Japanese PS3 owners can already download the title from the PlayStation Network shop, and there's little reason to suspect it won't be there for the console's European launch in March.

More demo than anything else, *Gran Turismo HD* is simply a high-definition respawn of the series. As such, little is enhanced bar the visual resolution, and online play was stripped away months ago, amid much disappointment. What there is instead amounts to a snippet of hi-def racing, the gorgeous new alpine Eiger Nordwand circuit and a chance to pilot *Gran Turismo's* first ever Ferrari.

Initially, just Time Trial mode is selectable, with only a hairdresser's favourite, the Suzuki Cappuccino, available to drive. Other marques are unlocked by posting record lap times, and your final prize is a garage of 20 cars – ten different models, with ten tuned versions – a reversed version of the circuit, and the Drift Trial mode. This scraps lap times, encouraging you to carve dusty arcs through each bend, collecting points for successful drifting.

Love it or loathe it, *GT's* characterless and clinical presentation is untouched, though there's a sneaking suspicion that, yes, you really will miss DualShock's rumble feature. However, given that your only investment is the time it takes to download, *Gran Turismo HD* can't be faulted on value.



The Eiger Nordwand is among the greatest of *Gran Turismo's* many circuits, a satisfying and flowing track surrounded by a fantastic alpine landscape







Drift Trials push you to let the car step out of line, rewarding players who can skilfully balance both throttle and brake

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **EIDOS HUNGARY**
ORIGIN: **HUNGARY**
RELEASE: **MARCH 30**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Battlestations Midway

Once feted for Gizmondo, does Eidos's three-in-one battler sink or sim?







Periscopes are discreet, deadly tools, but can be spotted if kept out of the water too long. The interface overhaul debuted at E3 adds a chunkier, more arcadey feel to a game that could otherwise be rather dry

To start with, *Battlestations Midway* appears to be quite boring. Once the hour-long tutorial is over, an empty seascape stretches out like a shimmering desert, leaving the player wondering what the hell to do next. As openings go, it hardly gets the pulse racing.

Conversely though, parts of the game in which nothing happens have an appeal of their own: a throwback to the tranquil sea- and sky-watching that punctuated much of *Silent Service* between engagements. As WWII simulations go, *Battlestations* is certainly well paced, realising that time really does equal distance and that enemies never appear out of nowhere; much of this game's appeal emanates from lying in wait as the horizon fills with enemy planes and warships.

Managing several forms of combat simultaneously (battleships, submarines and planes) is integral, so the game's control systems change between modes of combat, with varying degrees of success. Being able to flit from location to location is a genuinely seamless experience, with perpetual action realistically continuing in the background.



Ships are powerful in numbers but vulnerable alone. As you can see from this shot, the naval battles lack the visual flair and excitement of the game's aerial action

However, it's clear most of the effort has gone into ensuring that flying is visually impressive and physically exciting, leaving naval and submarine battles behind. From the air, the game world is spectacular, beautiful to fly through and peppered with stimulating dogfights. But from the sea it's sluggish and listless, a slow grind towards tit-for-tat completion. Multiplayer could well benefit from the sneaky *Battleships*-style attacks subs and frigates can perform, but if so, it doesn't translate well to singleplayer.

Judging by this preview build, *Battlestations* is a competent battle simulator that stretches itself a little too far. Ultimately, it's set to leave the player as a jack of all military trades, but master of none.

Heatseeker

Codemasters' flight combat sim succeeds in making the Wii fly

FORMAT: **PS2, PSP, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH 27**



The Remote can be used to steer the plane via a cursor, but this is likely to distance you from the heat of the action. Using the Nunchuk to move your craft around instead is both intuitive and instantaneous

The first thing you notice about this version of *Heatseeker* is how nice it looks. A step up from the GameCube visuals displayed in almost everything the Wii has presented us with so far, this suggests that making beautiful games for the console *is* possible if developers take the time to explore its capabilities fully. Deep colours permeate almost every frame; from the reds of the tropics to the whites of the Arctic, *Heatseeker* keeps almost all of its graphical elements clear, sharp and focused.

The aircraft have been modelled in collaboration with Lockheed-Martin, which wasn't keen to allow them to be deployed against any existing nation state. Players therefore take on the role of advocates for an imaginary international (for which read American) body fighting against an evil (read ex-Soviet) empire intent on destroying world peace.

Setting out to combine the immediacy of *Afterburner* with the range of aircraft of *Ace Combat*, *Heatseeker* hopes to differentiate itself by showing off some rather smart visual tricks. Spectacular aerial explosions



Although the game provides you with unlimited ammo, the guns and missiles can overheat, so you're often forced to wait some time between large-scale attacks

are played back in *Burnout* fashion, while bombs can be motion-guided to ground-based targets.

Codemasters has realised that Wii games need to be directly manipulated to feel truly immersive. Altitude and steering are both controlled with the Nunchuk, with the plane instantly and effortlessly following your movements. Locking enemy targets is the job of the Remote, which plays a largely peripheral role throughout.

It's very encouraging to see something on the Wii that doesn't need to hide behind motion-sensitive innovation to compensate for its visual presentation. *Heatseeker* may not be strikingly original, but it might make those still sceptical of Nintendo's console think again.



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **LEXICON ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **FRICTIONAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

Penumbra Overture

As game credits regularly stretch into the hundreds, four Swedes prove it doesn't have to be that way

A pacifist's *Half-Life 2*, *Penumbra Overture* doesn't really have any right to exist. The kind of simple physics puzzles familiar from Valve's dystopian nightmare make up the entire framework of *Penumbra's* take on the adventure game formula: stacking boxes, fixing component parts together and utilising objects in as realistic a physical sense as possible all feature heavily. So, having established that the whole of this title is founded upon the strengths of a superior videogame, why bother with it at all?

Perhaps because it's astounding that such a physically astute game could have been developed by just four people, especially considering how recently a team of ten times the size would have struggled to produce a world as complex as the one you explore here. Of course, those situations aren't really fair comparison, since the trickle-down of middleware is what has slashed the requirement for manpower and costs. Integrating an affordable physics engine (*Penumbra* harnesses Newton Game Dynamics) need not be an expensive business nowadays, meaning that smaller independent developers with the necessary savvy can compete on a slightly more even keel with industry behemoths.

And so the adventure game, so long one of the genres with the lowest cost of entry, and so long a genre that's struggled to make the best out of 3D, makes the jump into an ambitious new world. The addition of a strong physics systems means that the arbitary nature of so many poor adventure puzzles can be avoided, and while *Penumbra Overture* can't match Gordon Freeman's tale for atmospheric immersion, it makes an excellent job of trying. And while there's no denying it lacks the graphical flair it would need to compete with the big boys, for the budget (it will retail for a mere £15) and as a testament to plucky ambition, it's certainly deserving of a look.



Manipulating items is sensitive and precise, although there's no avoiding the slightly surreal silliness of your disembodied presence being able to wreak such physically embodied results

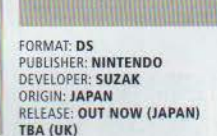




Some of the puzzles resemble those from survival horror titles such as *Silent Hill* rather than *Half-Life 2*, so grim are some of the subterranean surroundings

Kaitou Wario The Seven

Wario may be evil, but Nintendo is still hoping you'll reserve him a place in your heart



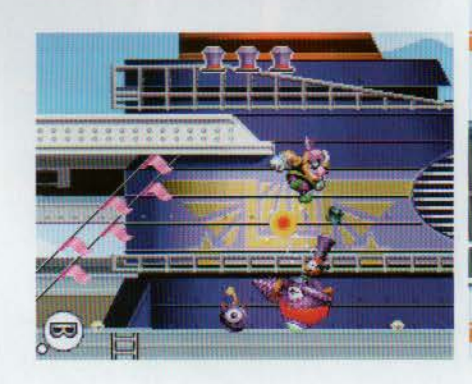
FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SUZAK**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN)**
TBA (UK)

As one of the company's less precious pieces of IP, Wario isn't burdened with the weight of expectation that moulds many of his Nintendo counterparts. Despite being a high-profile selling point for the likes of *WarioWare* and his previous platformers, his mythology is still flexible enough to allow developers space to experiment with his various character traits and abilities. *Kaitou Wario* (also known as *Master Of Disguise*) finds our anti-hero in a bright and bizarre world of 1950s B-movie paraphernalia. Greed is once again Wario's main motivation: his task is to steal a wish stone – a mystical object able to grant its owner anything he desires.

Essentially a sidescrolling platform adventure, *Kaitou Wario* offers Wario seven different B-movie disguises to complete his treasure hunt with. Chief amongst these is a fierce looking Godzilla costume which gives you the ability to breathe fire, and an astronaut suit which seems to allow the defiance of gravity. Touchscreen functionality allows you to draw in your own platforms and game actions to (literally) complete each level, as well as drawing symbols to switch between costumes. Long immune from death in his old platform games, Wario's chameleon disguise system is turning him into something of an anti-Kirby.

Developer Suzak specialises in Nintendo handheld products, largely through its *F-Zero* games for the GBA. It's difficult to see *Kaitou Wario* setting the DS world alight – it's likely to ignite a comparable amount of interest to Princess Peach's DS platformer – but that won't stop it being dastardly fun.







Even a disguise as comprehensive as this one can't quite hide the trademark Wario leer. Perhaps this will be the game that successfully heals the schism between old purple Wario and his current incarnation



ONCE UPON A TIME

A story 20 years in the writing and a game seven years in the making: BioWare unveils Dragon Age

Videogaming loves hyperbole. It's a culture of knee-jerk superlatives and empty exaggerations, which means that when you see the words 'BioWare's new epic', it's more than likely you'll read them simply as 'BioWare's new game'. But go back to that word epic, because there may be no more accurate way to describe *Dragon Age*. First announced at E3 2004, there's been no news since – a long enough lull that most have forgotten its existence. And its genesis is older even than that. Twenty man-years have been invested into its story, the telling of which has demanded the building of a new engine. And, with a release window of 2007/8, it's still yet to go into full production, as the exhaustive process of detailing the lore, refining the mechanics and scripting the story comes to an end. And so asking **Scott Greig**, the game's project director, to sum it up in a sentence is surely pushing your luck. How could such an epic project be so easily summarised?

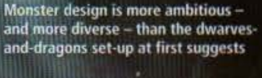
"We've been describing it as the spiritual successor to *Baldur's Gate*," says Greig, neatly. "What we really want to do is capture that party-based adventuring that we had originally, but bring it up to date and for a next-generation setting." And so as members of the original *Baldur's Gate* design and programming team moved on to the new project, *Dragon Age* started to take shape. But – as in every good epic – there was an early setback. "When we looked at what we wanted to accomplish with the game we thought, hmm, the technology isn't quite there

TITLE: **DRAGON AGE**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **2007/8**

yet. So this is why we've been quiet on it. We've been quietly building the technology and at the same time we've been developing the world IP to go with it." And what was behind the game's somewhat premature E3 debut? "At the time we were planning to announce *Mass Effect*, and *Jade Empire* had just come out, and wanted to make sure our PC fans knew that we were working on a PC game."

So what was the technology that the team was holding out for? "We look at these games not so much as RPGs but story-based adventuring, or story-based games, and we just didn't think that the digital actors were up to snuff to convey the kind of emotions that we wanted to do. If you think back to the original *Baldur's Gate*, you had basically only one channel of communication: the words. So if you wanted to get across that a character was angry, you had to write angry words. You had to write "No, dammit!" or something like that. Then, when we got to *KOTOR*, we had the second level, which was voiceover, so you could say angry words, like they'd shout out "NO!" with the voice inflection. And now we're getting to the next level with *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, where you can have the digital actor just look at the camera, and just glower and have that facial expression. They don't have to say a word and you can still get that emotional content across. So now we have three channels of communication and it's up to the writers and designers and artists to decide what's the most effective method of communicating that. So that was one of the technology things we wanted to make sure was there: the digital actors and their ability to convey emotion to the player."


As you would expect from a BioWare title, Greig promises a real sense of consequence for the actions and choices you make


Monster design is more ambitious – and more diverse – than the dwarves-and-dragons set-up at first suggests







And that emotion is due to be triggered by *Dragon Age*'s truly epic setting. "Our designers have just gone nuts on it. They've put together a world history that went back 5,000 years and what we wanted to do was make sure that everything in the world made sense. We've had a team of five people working on the world thing for about four years, so that's a fair amount of work."

So, appetite whetted, but just what shape does this epic take? Just what does a world 20 years in the dreaming look like? There's a promising intake of breath before Greig stops himself: "No. I've got a threat from the writer that if I reveal any story stuff at this point – well, the threats sounded sufficiently dire that I'm going to have to skip on that one for the time being." *Any* story stuff? Would it be going out on a limb to presume there are going to be dragons in it? Greig relents. "Well, there are dragons. The name *Dragon Age* actually refers to the world age. This is the age of dragons, so we wanted to make it feel that this is history come to life – like the era of legends and heroes. But the world setting itself – one of our designers came up with the term 'dark heroic fantasy', because we're really taking the elements from high fantasy. You know, this is your more traditional fantasy: you've got magic, dragons, heroes and villains, and we're incorporating a

Although combat is controlled through a traditional overhead view, its accuracy and dynamism can be appreciated up close

lot of elements from dark fantasy. That's like the horror elements, so the monsters are terrifying; it's got a gritty reality to it. Much more mature sensibilities than what we've done in the past."

So, magic, dragons, heroes and horrors. Really no hints at all about the story? Greig laughs. "Boy, I wish I could go into a lot of the details on it, but, the story itself... whenever we go through the whole story thing with people they're always like: 'Wow, I didn't know you could do that', and: 'Wow, that's actually kinda shocking!' That's one of the reactions we generally get. You have to realise that our audience is, essentially, growing up. The average age is well into the 20s and almost in their 30s now and the fans themselves are actually demanding more sophistication, both from the storytelling and the actual setting. We're shooting for something more like the new Battlestar Galactica. If the more traditional high fantasy stuff was like the '70s Battlestar Galactica, we're trying to get *Dragon Age* to feel like the more up-to-date modern version of it. All the key elements are there, but the characters are a lot more realistic, they have a lot more depth. They're what real people would do if they were put into this sort of situation, and that's what we mean when we say we're doing dark fantasy. It really is your fantasy all grown up."

The distinction is interesting: many game sequels are focus purely on trying to clone the successes of the original. Others take an older idea and try to update it to reflect the innovations in other games which have followed it. With *Dragon Age*, BioWare seems to be taking a different approach, acknowledging instead that *Baldur's Gate*'s sizable audience is still out there, but older, wiser and choosier. But while that may give a direction to the plot, how do you design a game for players whose tastes have evolved but whose playing habits may not? How familiar an experience will *Dragon Age* be to *Baldur's Gate* veterans?

"When we watch people play, they spend almost half the time exploring the world, talking to characters"

"Yeah, we're trying to capture the same feeling as that," confirms Greig. "But we've learned a lot about user interfaces and what players actually like to do, so it will be updated. The other thing that we're pushing in *Dragon Age* is the player experience. So, when we watch people play, they spend almost half the time exploring the world, talking to the characters, and we've found that the best way of immersing the player is with the over-the-shoulder thirdperson camera, like in *KOTOR*. So walking through the game, you can see the environments, you can see the sky



AGE OF EMPIRES

For a long time BioWare seemed the epitome of the single studio/ single project model, but that changed with the recent investment from Elevation which funded the formation of BioWare/ Pandemic Studios. With *Dragon Age*, *Mass Effect* and an un-named MMO in development at BioWare's second studio in Austin, Texas, as well as the announcement last year of a new handheld division, the company is evolving fast, something Greig (above), who was BioWare's first full-time employee, is well placed to judge.

"I started at BioWare about 11 years ago, so I've seen the company go from one person all the way up to 300. People on the outside say: 'Oh my god, you've changed a lot in the last few years,' but Bioware's done nothing but change. I've seen the entire growth of it. But there have been a couple of things that have been absolutely unchanging, and that's the company's commitment to quality games and a quality workplace for the employees. It doesn't matter that now we've got these new teams working on these different projects like the MMOG down in Austin, the core thing is making people feel they've got a great place to work, and the quality of the games hasn't changed. One of the keys to success is that no matter where we go or what we do in the future, as long as we stick to our core beliefs on that, everything's going to work out."



A 5,000 year back-story underpins all the game's locations, from architecture and technology to language and mythology



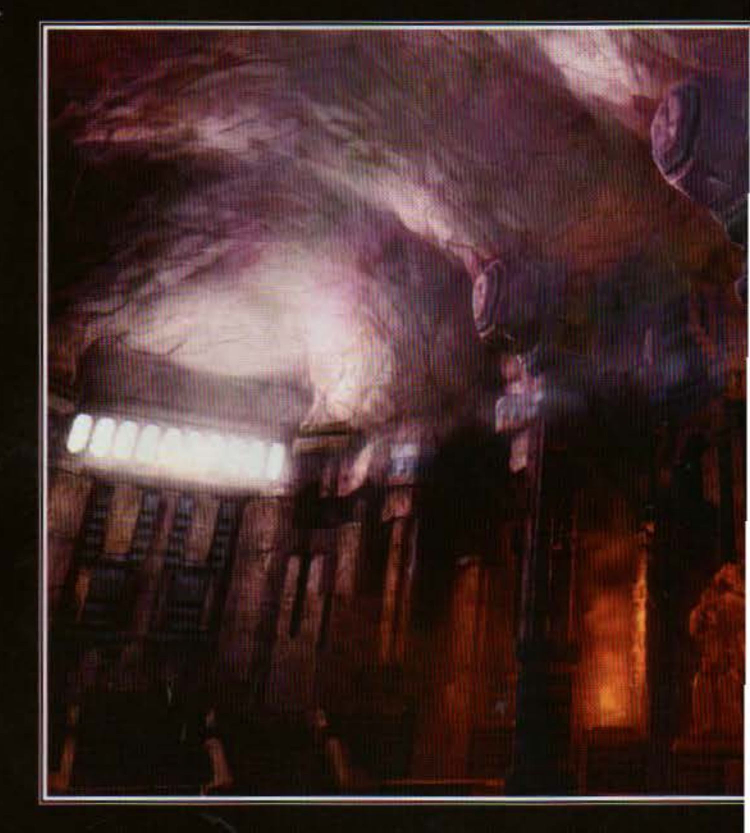
Dragon Age will feature what Greig calls "large creature combat", which sounds similar to *Warrior Within*'s giant boss fights

and it hooks you into it. But when the combat starts, you can pull out the camera, to get that full tactical view, because we're really going to be pushing the party combat mechanics. You're going to be able to do things like do combinations between the characters. For example, one of the monsters might pin down another party member and you have to send another party member over to rescue them. The thing that made *BG* work was that you had full control over your party members and you ended up using tactics to solve puzzles, so almost every combat is like sort of a mini puzzle. So we've been working on advancements of what kind of combination techniques can you put together, what the tactics and strategy are, and also the refinement of the visuals and the action. Want to make sure it plays a little faster and is more exciting, but also want to have that pause and play ability, so you can stop, issue commands, and see how it works out."

And those characters are a key part of the *Dragon Age* vision. "That's another thing we wanted to do," elaborates Greig. "We did a lot of research into how the players actually play the games, and it came out that, unlike a lot of other games, when players are in the fantasy settings they have a particular character they like to play over and over again. And it's not the same for each player. So what we've done is we've pulled out the key character archetypes and we're putting together these things that we've called origin stories. Now, there have been a couple of games that have dabbled with this before, but our origin stories are basically the first one-to-two hours, depending on how you play the game. You would do your character creation – this is the full customisation, so you pick your race, your class, all the usual stuff, but then you also pick your origin story. So, for example, if you picked dwarves, you'd have the option of becoming a dwarf noble – so you're essentially the son of the dwarven king, or the daughter, and there's an entire one-to-two hour adventure that sets you up in the world. What we wanted to do, essentially, was give you a narrow but deep slice of the world setting. You know, if you picked dwarves, you're obviously interested in the dwarf setting. It brings you into the larger story, and it also sets up personal events that sort of affect the course of the game throughout. For example, almost every origin story has some sort of nemesis that you run into – so there's some sort of story hook in there, and each one is different, and you'll be running into this nemesis throughout the game. And when you choose your origin story it actually has different outcomes throughout the game, so later on, no matter which origin story you choose to play, you end up going back to the dwarf city. Now, if you'd chosen the dwarf noble, then obviously you're the son of the king and there's something that happened that made you leave, and this totally changes the story outcome for this part of the game."

There's a clear hope that the strength of the origin stories will drive players to replay: "What we wanted to do again was to make sure there was enough familiarity for players coming in but also to make sure there was enough depth for exploration for people to play through it. So, essentially, you pick one of the three base classes, either wizard, fighter or rogue, and very quickly you get exposed to advanced classes, and you can totally customise how your character develops. And after a few more levels there are even more advanced classes to choose from. So there are quite a few class combinations, and how you pick your abilities and skills in that completely allows you to customise it. If you're a person who likes to play a fighter, but with magic-like abilities, you have that option, or if you want to have a wizard with some fighting skills, or if you've always just wanted to have a wizard with a sword, you can do that too. You have the ability to redirect your choices as you go through, but one of the things we've been focusing on is replayability. Especially with the origin stories, we've figured that people will play through one and say: 'Wow, I chose the dwarf and this is really detailed. What if I went back and played the wizard origin story instead?' and you go play through that and there's a completely different set-up on it, so there's going to be a fair amount of replayability in any case. The other thing is that

"When players are in the fantasy settings they have a particular character they like to play over and over again"



as you go through the game you'll meet other characters and have them join your party, so there's the ability to fully upgrade those classes as well, so you'll be able to experiment with the different classes even on your first playthrough.

And that other hallmark of the *Baldur's Gate* experience – user-created content – will make a return. "Oh, absolutely. We've got an updated toolset, it's actually pretty powerful. On the *Neverwinter* toolset, you couldn't make a bad module, but you were pretty limited on some of the things that you could do. With the *Dragon Age* one we've wanted to make sure that the experience is actually the best, so we wanted to make sure that the toolset is more powerful than what you've had in the past. We've taken off the training wheels, essentially, so that will be available for the users to create content on. We've frankly been amazed by what the users have been able to do with the *Neverwinter* stuff, so it became clear that they were capable of using a more powerful system, so we're gong to make sure that – it's certainly going to be as user-friendly as possible, but they're basically going to be able to make the same quality of game that we have if they put the time and effort into it."



Character choice promises to be wide, as Greig notes there's little consensus among players about what makes an appealing role



Greig acknowledges debts of inspiration to Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings films and GRR Martin's Game of Thrones epic fantasy novels



The story opens with what Greig calls "a major world event" and it seems certain that you'll be called on to manage your allegiance between different races, nations and factions

Indeed, the *NWN* toolset underpins the entire *Dragon Age* experience: one of the reasons for the long gestation is that the whole game has already been made once already: "Yeah, we actually use *Neverwinter Nights* as a prototyping tool to set up the actual story, and play through it," explains Greig. "You have to use your imagination a lot of times, you know: 'Imagine this, but looking really good'. But it's really interesting that you have this really long pre-production on the cycle, and all the content comes in in a really short amount of time. And we can do that because we've actually built the actual story, we've been able to play through it several times, doing our refinements and testing on it."



And that investment is key, because *Dragon Age* is more than a game. "It's definitely a long-haul project because we have got new technology, a new world IP and, as I said, it was pretty clear to us up front that you couldn't do this half-way, you had to go all the way through it. And there's been a lot of work working on the technology. This is basically going to be the technology base that BioWare's going to be using for its next several games too, so we've had all the joys of building the next-gen engine technology that goes with it."

So: BioWare's new epic. Stretching into the past, and forming the foundations of the future. Drawing on tradition but growing with its audience. It means that, as all epics should be, it's a project fraught with risk. Have the expectations of that maturing audience moved beyond the click-based combat at the heart of the *Baldur's Gate* experience? What use will 5,000 years of history be if the game's traditional elements leave it lost in the increasing crowded realms of dark fantasy? But Greig, telling the epic story of his epic game, shows nothing but steely relish. "I think," he says with satisfaction, "people will be surprised how far we're going to push this".



Photography: **Frank Rosenstein**

THE LAST FREE MAN

Where will games take the PC? Where will the PC take games? Who better to ask than Valve's Gabe Newell?

Gabe Newell is the managing director of something we have no name for. The company he co-founded ten years ago, Valve, to make the game that would become *Half-Life*, is now part-developer, part-distributor, part-tools provider, part-publisher. Having embraced mod-making, eSports, online distribution and episodic content, Valve has consistently shown itself to have a progressive and inclusive vision of what PC gaming can be. So where does the man with no publisher to please, no retailer to serve and no licensor to obey think PC gaming is going?

Valve has become an increasingly hybrid company in the last ten years. Do you think that nowadays it's a bit outmoded to still be thinking in terms of being solely a publisher, or a developer, or a distributor?

I just don't think it's helpful when you're figuring out which decisions to make. I think you need to think: 'How are we either helping our customers or how are we helping other developers?' There's been this notion, really pioneered by John Carmack, that your game is actually a starting point for other people to do stuff with, and that meant thinking about other things like graphics and interfaces, entities and three-dimensional worlds, but nowadays it means thinking about things like payment systems and anti-piracy.

The Steam download service has evolved very rapidly over the last few years – has that been part of that same thinking?

I think with whatever we do there's always what we're going to do with it and what we think other people might want to do with it, whether it's our development tools or our game code or our engine or friends or whatever. There's what we can do with it, which is to create *Half-Life*, and then there's what other people can do with it, which is to create *Team Fortress* and *Counter-Strike*. When we were thinking what we would like for Steam, we always assumed that in turn we'd have to make it available for other people, who would also figure out how to take advantage of it. Some people, like the guys who did *Ragdoll Kung Fu*, were unable to get a traditional retailing relationship, so it was super-useful to them. And other people say: 'You know, this solves update problems for us because we don't have an adequate mechanism for getting our patches out to all of our customers.' So whatever we do we're always going to look at it in terms of internal purposes as well as providing a building block for other people to build on.

Speaking of *Ragdoll Kung Fu*, what's the selection process now for a game being distributed via Steam?

We don't really think of ourselves as having that traditional publisher 'here's our certification' process. We view ourselves more as creating tools for end-users and other software developers. So if software developers say: 'Hey, that's useful,' then we're perfectly happy to let them build on it. I think we tend to view ourselves as really in the tools business than in the gatekeeper...

> "We view ourselves more as creating tools for end-users and other software developers. So if software developers say: 'Hey, that's useful,' then we're perfectly happy to let them build on it"

So it's predominantly a case of people coming to you rather than vice versa?

Well, right now I'm talking with pretty much everybody in the industry, so it's not so much a case of people coming to us. We have pretty good relations with just about all of the developers and publishers that we're aware of, and certainly if there's somebody new coming along that we don't have a relationship with, we're always interested in talking to people. We've been pretty good at reaching out to new developers as they come along.

Do you think there's a snobbishness in PC gaming that looks down on lower-spec games that aren't cutting edge, but still aim to be a high-quality product?

I think that would be a huge mistake. I mean, look at Popcap's ability to sell five million copies of *Bejeweled*, which, you know, by no stretch of the imagination is pushing the boundaries of DirectX 10. Certainly some of the most successful titles in PC history, such as Sid Meier's *Civilization* line or the *Sims* line have not been driven out of their visual quality, so I think that it's a big mistake to view graphics as being the end-all, be-all. Certainly, when I talk with other developers, they understand the importance of the performance enhancements we've been seeing on the graphics side, but I think everybody understands the fundamental

importance of good gameplay. I think the thing that's interesting is that the same underlying hardware dynamics that have been allowing graphics to improve so rapidly, all the way back to the Voodoo FX 3D card, are now going to start being applied to the rest of the game engine as well. The emergence of multi-core, which is essentially the CPU manufacturers adopting the same approach that the graphics card manufacturers have been using to increase performance, means that we're now going to see that same huge increase in performance for everything other than graphics. And I think that we'll see some more balance returning to where people can be excited about PC gaming. We're going to see an order of magnitude, two orders of magnitude improvement in AI performance over the next couple of years, or physics, or animation, or whatever in the same way we've seen those performance improvements just in particle systems or polygon and shader rendering. We've got a little out of balance, and the fact that the CPU guys are going to go with multicore strategy means that we're going to see all the other parts of the game catch up.

There's often developer frustration about putting effort into the latter stages of a game that many players won't end up seeing. Is there a similar frustration about designing high-end visuals which most players can't display?
We kinda like our customers and we let them tell us what they want. One of the reasons we're experimenting with episodic is that it lets us track the hardware changes much more closely as they occur. For example, one of the things we're seeing right now is that our customers are really starting to adopt multicore processors much more quickly, and that's causing us to say we have to invest in that, and they're holding on to their DirectX 7 graphics processors so we need to support that. I think everybody here is much more interested in making our customers happy than in pining for some idealised world of infinite graphics performance. That sort of permeates everybody here. If people want to run our games on a Nintendo DS, well that's great, we're going to run them on a Nintendo DS, because we like customers more than we like vanity graphics showcases.

It's been a little over six month's since the release of *Half-Life 2: Episode One* – how good has the uptake been among players?
So far it's been great. We want to go through this three times, we want to make sure that people aren't just excited by the novelty, but certainly, *Episode One*'s been really successful for us, and we'll just sit down with our customers after we've done it three times. It's like if you did anything once in this industry, you'd make really bad decisions both positively and negatively. We'll certainly crank on that a few times and then sit back with the fans and talk about what the feedback is and go from there.

The episodic model means that you're producing smaller chunks of narratives than before. Is this something that's fun and works better now, or are the team feeling the constraints when they're used to having the full length of a game in which to explore their ideas?
No, we're having more fun, it's definitely more enjoyable. At this point in *Half-Life 2* we were still years away from even revealing it publicly, whereas with the episodic, we've already shipped *Episode One*. We've received about 7,000 emails from people that myself and people in the team all read, so it gives us a lot more confidence going into *Episode Two*: 'These decisions worked, these decisions didn't... we need to do less of this repetitive thing and more of this character development thing.' It's a lot more enjoyable to feel like you're more engaged in that feedback process with the fans than still being years away from even announcing it.

"I think it's fun to get into big flame wars with industry people in the press. I've certainly been entertained by those back and forths, but from our own point of view, they're just sideshows"

So if the three episodes are successful, then this would be a model you'd like to switch to as your basic approach?
Yep. So far.

The games industry invests a lot of energy in making consumers excited about things they can't play for years. Do you think it would be in its interest to shorten that hype cycle?
We'd like to and we're trying to find people to work with in the other direction and make it shorter and shorter. In time-honoured Valve tradition, we've managed to delay our shorter things just as often as we've delayed our longer things. [Laughs] But it would be nice to find people with a different perspective and find out what happens when you release things once a week, you know, the TV model. They'd obviously be much smaller, but it would be interesting to move more and more in that direction and ask: 'What is our TV model? What does it look like when you're trying to serialise content at that level?' We're not at the level where we're ready to do that, but we'd like to work with people who are coming out of the TV world and wanting to do the interactive thing. The interesting thing for us won't be the gaming part we're totally used to, but the scheduling demands and the production constraints of pumping out 22 shows, 22 pieces of content per year. It doesn't seem that that's going to come out of the game space, but maybe someone who's used to the TV space will... I think consumers would love it, I think that they're looking for it. We've got the feature film part of our offering in great shape, but we're looking for the more serialised part of the experiences that I think people would respond to well.

And it would engender a lot more risk-taking in the content?
Right. If you fail, you've just failed for a week rather than four years.

That, and ideas such as Steam, are still innovations that seem to trouble people in the industry. Do you resent the fact that the industry is often hostile towards these things, or do you see it as an indicator that you're pushing in the right direction?
I think it's fun to get into big flame wars with industry people in the press. I've certainly been entertained by those back and forths, but from our own point of view, they're just sideshows. The important questions





are: 'What do your customers think?' or 'What do the people who are using you for tools think about what you're doing?' I do think there are people who are more willing to take risks, some of the smaller, newer developers who don't really see themselves being successful using traditional methods are looking for opportunities, so I think you'll start seeing some risk-taking from newer parties. And once those roads have been trodden a little bit, it'll be safer for more risk-averse organisations to go down that route. But I'm much more worried about the emails I get from fans rather than things in the press saying: 'Episodic is stupid and customers won't like it,' because what that really means nine times out of ten is: 'I don't have an episode coming, so I'm going to badmouth it because I don't have one of those in my portfolio.' It's not a super-reasoned evaluation.

Looking at the *Episode Two/Portal/Team Fortress 2* bundle you're putting together for the 360 and PS3, it looks like you are very confident about the gaming culture on consoles being the same as the gaming culture within the PC market. Do you think people over-estimate the cultural divide between the two?
I guess we don't know how to make decisions that way. It's like girl gamers. People say: 'Oh, you should make games for girls!', and we're like: 'As far as we know, we are.' We haven't gone out and said: 'You guys are different so we're going to do something else.' In the same way we think that good games and good product packaging decisions and so on and so forth are going to appeal to people, and if they don't we'll find out why and we'll fix those. I tend to be a little sceptical of these distinctions that people make. A good game is a good game and it's going to be successful. I've never seen a great game fail because it was targeted at the wrong audience. Instead what you see is that a great game causes everybody to rewrite the clichés that people use to carve up the world. So hopefully we're right and we're putting the right products in front of customers, regardless of the hardware they're playing it on, and, if not, hopefully they'll tell us how to do it better the next time.

"I've never seen a great game fail because it was targeted at the wrong audience. Instead... a great game causes everybody to rewrite the clichés that people use to carve up the world"

How significant is the arrival of Windows Vista for you?
Right now I think we're sort of focused on how painful Vista is for our customers. SLI is not supported yet, there are no 8800 drivers, so even though it's about DX10, the only DX10 hardware doesn't have drivers for it yet. Limited user accounts are very frustrating. It seems that in some ways Vista is very much a work in progress, so it's nice that there are going to be end caps for customers in retailer stores. However, for our customers, the sort of key features they already have in XP are going to make it hard for people to migrate over to Vista at the moment. It really puts a drag on Microsoft's attempts to position Vista as a great gaming platform when there are so many nuts-and-bolts issues that it fails on in comparison to XP.

PC is the biggest sophisticated gaming platform in the world, and yet it rarely gets treated as such. Does that still surprise you or does the fragmentation of the hardware make that an inevitable problem?
I don't understand it. Like right now if you ask everybody what the big battle is they'll say it's between the Xbox 360 and the PS3, whereas really, it seems that *World Of WarCraft* is a much bigger business, certainly a vastly more profitable business than the Xbox is. If the guys at Blizzard simply called *WOW* a next-generation console, it would be a much bigger success than either of those two. I mean, if they opened themselves up and redefined a next-gen console as a software platform rather than a hardware platform then they'd be a much more exciting story. It's the same thing with the Nintendo DS: that's the thing that's selling all the hardware and moving all the units.

There's a fun story to tell, which is that of these two big, multimedia, multifunction, more-expensive-than-a-low-end-PC juggernauts beating each other. But that sort of causes a whole load of real-world stories, such as the huge success of *WOW* and the huge success of the DS to sort of disappear. And I think one of those other stories that just sort of disappears is that when Microsoft wants to talk about gaming, the reality is that the analysts get shepherded over to the Xbox group but not the Windows group, and when somebody says something about PS3 sales, 15 people at PR agencies working for Sony call that person up and correct them, but when somebody says something incorrect about PC sales... I mean, we find ourselves in this weird situation where we're a privately-held company and all the analysts call us up because we're one of the few people who will actually talk about electronic distribution.

When people were talking about the decline in PC revenue, they were completely ignoring cyber cafés, they were completely ignoring the recurring revenue being generated by MMORPGs, they had never heard of Popcap or any of the causal games that were being sold over the internet. There's just no real stakeholder there who's helping people understand what's really going on. In the absence of that, it's not so surprising that the success of the PC as a gaming platform tends to disappear from the stories that are being written – it's simply because there isn't a large PR agency somewhere being paid from platform fees to pump up those stories.

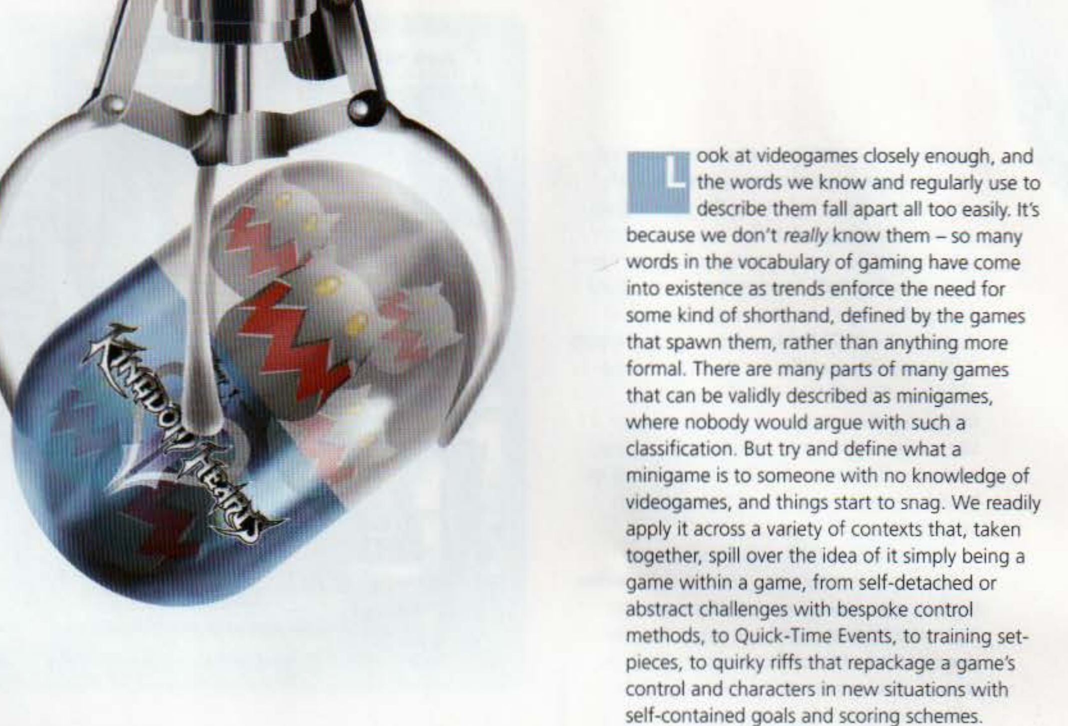
In terms of the future of PC gaming, what most needs to change to enable you to do the things you'd like to do?
Well, the thing that I'm most excited about right now is the advent of multi-core hardware designs from the CPU manufacturers, because that's going to change the design of games over the next couple of years enormously. It's also going to give us more opportunities to do all of the things other than graphics in games, so I find that super-exciting. If I could pick one thing, it would be that the attention MS is spending on the Xbox instead got spent on making the PC a better consumer client, because right now it sort of feels like they're in reverse. It's like, for a real customer if you put Vista on their PC in the next six months it's going to be a worse experience than having XP on that box, and that seems very strange when it's supposedly a big step forward for gaming.

Miniature heroes

When videogames are thinking bigger and bigger, why do so many keep reaching for minigames?







Look at videogames closely enough, and the words we know and regularly use to describe them fall apart all too easily. It's because we don't *really* know them – so many words in the vocabulary of gaming have come into existence as trends enforce the need for some kind of shorthand, defined by the games that spawn them, rather than anything more formal. There are many parts of many games that can be validly described as minigames, where nobody would argue with such a classification. But try and define what a minigame is to someone with no knowledge of videogames, and things start to snag. We readily apply it across a variety of contexts that, taken together, spill over the idea of it simply being a game within a game, from self-detached or abstract challenges with bespoke control methods, to Quick-Time Events, to training set-pieces, to quirky riffs that repackage a game's control and characters in new situations with self-contained goals and scoring schemes.

The unlockable Mercenaries arena battle in *Resident Evil 4* – is it a sub-game, a minigame or a mode? It's very likely been described as all three in the time since the game's release, to the sound of nobody batting an eyelid. Can you define minigames in terms of control schemes? No – most of *Mercury Meltdown*'s minigames utilise the same controls and conventions as the game proper, and some don't, but they exist as equals. Can you define them in terms of being peripheral to the main game? No – *Viva Piñata*



won't let you breed its creatures without first completing the romance minigame for each, while many a boss fight from the *Sly Raccoon* universe is a minigame rolled out just for one special occasion. Is it a question of depth? No – *Super Monkey Ball's* Monkey Target can easily engage for more time than a playthrough of Ubisoft's *Prince Of Persia*, while *Kingdom Hearts II's* Gummi shooter offers as much to do and unlock as *God Of War*. The things about minigames that cause us to call them that – size, scope, objectives, controls, presentation, context – often occur starkly enough for us to be able to spot them, but not consistently enough for a definition.

Minigames, in their various forms, are becoming an increasingly common sight within big-business videogames (see the shots and boxouts scattered over these pages for a very slim selection of those from recent years), an area of development and publishing that's infamously operating under strenuous economics and the pressures of asset generation, bullied into release by financial quarters. So why have minigames become so prevalent, when the games themselves have begun to demand such an escalation in effort?

Games are getting larger, and have more space to fill. There's tremendous expectation for them to offer players increasingly refined or sophisticated ideas, but within an experience that remains resolutely accessible. The need to think big and not lose sight of the player while they're taking the game one little step at a time can be eased by what we think of as minigames. They can be cheap pit-stops, tapping the generic building blocks of videogame interactions – rhythm-action sequences, duck shoots, reaction tests – in order to add some quick-fix variety. They can be vehicles for ideas that just wouldn't fit in anywhere else, but are worth including. They can reinforce a game world's authenticity, through city streets whose bars actually host bar-room games, say. They can be vending machines for simple purse-filling rewards or extra content, increasing the time a player spends with the game as a whole. And it's hard not to think that they can mean as much to developers as players, allowing them to leave a more personal mark on the game, to pay homage, to be a bedroom programmer from the office complex, to cut loose and leak out some personality, wit, self-awareness or absurdity that just wouldn't fit into whatever snarling sci-fi military shooter it features in – or perhaps simply and honestly to try and show the player a better time. And there must be some brutal money-maths behind them: two minutes spent with a throwaway arcade clone is likely cheaper to produce than the two minutes the

Super Monkey Ball's Monkey Target can easily engage for more time than Ubisoft's Prince Of Persia





Mercury Meltdown

As with *Super Monkey Ball*, *Mercury Meltdown* has such a clean and pliant control method at its core that it transplants well to the realm of the minigame, five of which appeared in this PSP/PS2 sequel. Aside from blobby takes on racing and curling, and block-based puzzler Metrix (below left), Rodeo (top left) offers a boisterous battle with a fan attempting to blow you off a series of platforms, while Paint (below) involves colouring in more of the floor than your opponent, with the slimy trails your glob leaves behind.





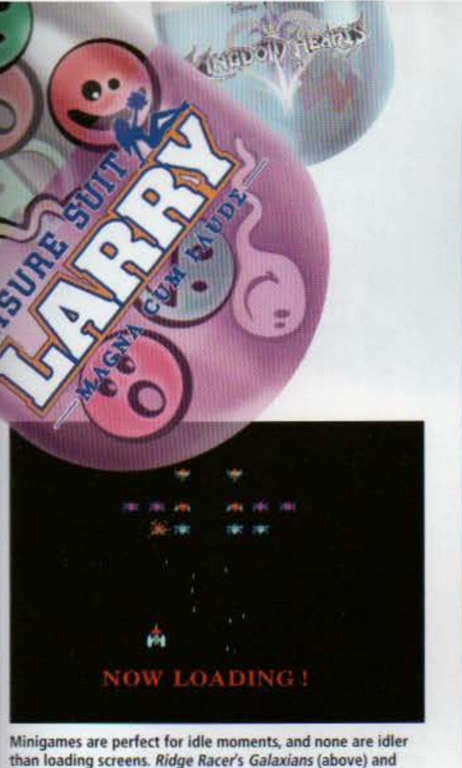


Alien Hominid

Having blossomed from a limited Flash darling to full console product, *Alien Hominid* seemed to want to make the most of its brief time in the spotlight, evidenced as much by its minigames as the luscious imagination visible across its 16 stages. The PDA game (top left) a simple but responsive and energetically drawn platformer, offered 200 stages along with a level editor. And in among a further handful of bonus games, Super Soviet Missile Mastar [sic] (below left) is far less of a diversion, but still full of character.



Colour where you expect it least; minigames like *Siren's* Zuno give the developer of such a shadow-shrouded title a chance to flash its fluffier side



Minigames are perfect for idle moments, and none are idler than loading screens. *Ridge Racer's Galaxians* (above) and *Okami's* button-bashers are instant, successful distractions







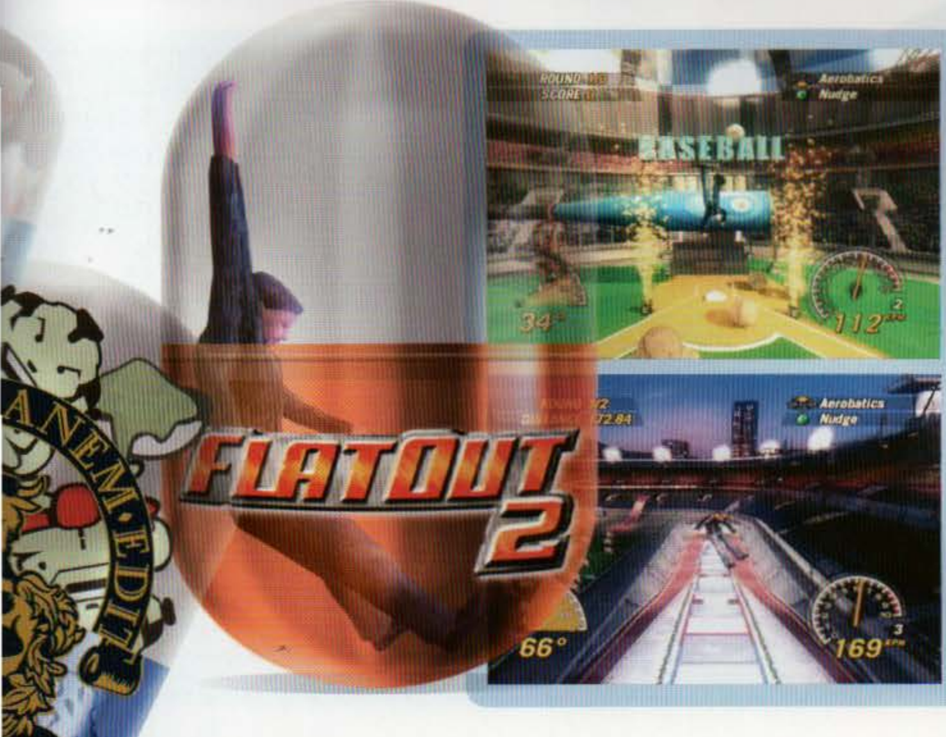
Mortal Kombat

Whether you see it as senility brought on by creative despair or a franchise established enough to comfortably poke fun at itself, the *Mortal Kombat* titles of the departing generation have brought with them three brazen but unexciting minigames that show that, while the series has always put on a grim face, it's rarely been serious. *Mortal Kombat: Deception* proffered Puzzle Kombat and Chess Kombat (above and top left), while *Armageddon* decided to throw a dart at which genre to spin off next, with – wait for it – Motor Kombat (left).

player would spend dashing through a painstakingly sculpted environment.

Increasingly, though, they're there to provide easy variation – now the bedrock of licensed kids' titles – and the illusion of greater interaction, while becoming more directly integrated into the games themselves. Both *Tomb Raider Legend* and *God Of War*, as two of many possible examples, feature sections where control over the character is reduced from the whole pad to a few buttons, reaction tests used to activate the next portion of a pre-rendered sequence where the hero gets to avoid death or kill an enemy in a much more dynamic and dramatically presented manner than is otherwise possible. We already have a word for these minigame-like activities – Quick Time Events. Although present in games as far back as *Dragon's Lair* in 1983, the QTE was christened by *Shenmue*, whose equally-loudly touted FREE (Full Reactive Eyes Environment) system just wasn't full and reactive enough to facilitate many of the events taken in by Yu Suzuki's story. QTEs allow a game's hero to do more, but allow the player to do less, potentially developing a stronger connection with the character at the risk of weakening the connection with the game world. If this trade-off fails, the player has been effectively dropped into a glorified cutscene that they're not able to fully appreciate.

On top of that, minigame mechanisms are increasingly being applied to mini-events as well as major ones. Tony Montana's ability to verbally influence characters in *Scarface*, in order to fast-talk an alerted cop or get a better deal from a drugs sale, is reduced to a series of golf-swing meters, as is the power to intimidate goons in *The Punisher*. Such retrograde simplicity may seem crude, but it means such concepts can actually work and be included as a legitimate, if hollow, part of a game character's repertoire of actions. Indeed, conversations in videogames compete with hacking/lockpicking in terms of the frequency with which such actions turn to minigames: from the immense streams of





Flatout 2

While many racing games aim to put you squarely in the driver's seat, *Flatout 2* revels in the act of taking you out of it again, through the windscreen and a series of fiery hoops, before thudding to the ground in a wincing ragdoll heap. The Ragdoll Olympics minigames can't compete with the variety and durability of *Monkey Ball's* silly sports – all 12 of them effectively mixing human cannonball with giant props – but ragdoll abuse will always hold a certain appeal. Clockwise from left: Ragdoll Ski Jumping, Baseball and Darts.





Kingdom Hearts II

Few minigames become big enough to stand on their own – see *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* – but the Gummi ship shoot 'em up sections in *Kingdom Hearts II* offer enough content to, perhaps in the eyes of some publishers, justify a separate release on DS. Taking the drab world-linking stages from the first game, *Kingdom Hearts II* plumps it all up and out into a much fizzier package, each level featuring multiple goal routes, culminating in killcount runs with free camera control.



Casinos are a minigame staple, a one-size-fits-any suite of gambling games that slots in almost anywhere: *Dragon Quest VIII*, DOA Xtreme 2 (above), *Enchanted Arms* or *God Hand*

There's only so much raw material to recycle before minigame activities have to stop being mini

dialogue in *Oblivion* to the blundering chat-up lines of Leisure Suit Larry, any nuance of communication is compacted into minigames that could just as well be used to represent any other number of situations.

If part of the role of videogames is to give us a window into what it's like to enjoy and do impossible things, such false sophistication is hardly a rosy template for the future, nor is it a sustainable one. With established game genres growing like fractals – building on what has gone before and branching out in a number of ways, but covering less and less fresh ground as they go – there's only so much raw material to recycle before minigame activities have to stop being mini. And maybe it's at that point that their lack of connection to events described above will become much harder to overlook. Not that there won't be room for some vivacious results; in the past six months, both *Thrillville* and *Canis Canem Edit* have successfully offered experiences centred on bite-sized gaming, the former an elaborate world of minigames, the latter blending them into an elaborate world.

For the near future, at least, minigames won't be receding. The aftershocks of *GTA III* rumble more deeply through gaming than just spawning a number of like-thinking games that try to bastardise or refine its framework. The 3D *GTA* games embody a shift in expectations of what cutting-edge videogames are capable of achieving, not so much placing the player into a game, but into a *world* in which gaming can happen. But the problem then, as *GTA: San Andreas* so ably demonstrated, of having a persistent and open world is that it needs to be filled with varied activities for it to matter beyond existing as an elaborate backdrop; and when world-creation is so intense – and mission





Thrillville

Though it may have had its crusts cut off in order to suit younger players, *Thrillville* still manages to turn theme park management into the very thing that attracted gamers to the fairground in the first place: an arcade. Every game stall and carnival stand placed in between the rollercoasters and racetracks offers a minigame, making for a magpie's haul of play styles and retro citations that make it feel like the candy-coated, big-top relation of Nintendo's immense *42 All-Time Classics* for DS.





Super Monkey Ball

It feels like *Super Monkey Ball's* best minigames nailed disciplined simplicity way before DS started asking the same from all of its developers. Monkey Target and Monkey Bowling have long endured in the face of any number of bowling and bullseye-style minigames since, their crispness, precision and charm succeeding where, say, *Tony Hawk's Project 8's* own similarly-styled ragdoll challenges barely manage to exceed novelty status. Clockwise from bottom left: Monkey Fight, Monkey Bowling, Monkey Target.

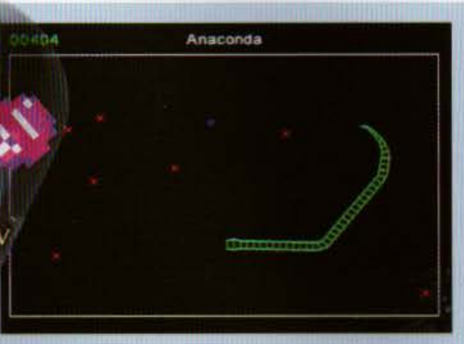
design often crafted around such worlds instead of being the basis for them – it's minigame culture that's most often going to be reached for in order to deliver the most dependable and efficient multi-part play experience.

Of course, much of all this stems from so much of gaming being built around control schemes – buttons, keys, triggers, sticks and mice – that have barely evolved compared to the hardware that uses them. Which means, of course, it's time to mention Nintendo: both DS and Wii feature new avenues of tactility, while retaining elements of traditional control schemes. If an award was to be handed out to one company for services to minigames, and no surprise given the length, breadth and vitality of its track record, it would go to Nintendo. For *WarioWare*, which didn't so much rip-off established game styles for its miniaturised kicks but founded a new one through its flick-book approach, turning the act of completing minigames into a minigame itself, and birthing the microgame. For both the little things – *Super Mario 64 DS's* best minigames, along with those of the *Mario Party* series and *Wind Waker's* battleships, among many others – and the bigger picture, funnelling its energies into not one, but two pieces of hardware dedicated to making simple activities stand for something more. Minigames can either bog down or buoy the DS and the Wii to a much greater extent than on other hardware, testament to their capacity for redefining the building blocks of play; it's now up to the software to turn such potential into an actuality.

While the use of the word 'minigame' may lead to it being difficult to pin down, the recognisable ideas behind such a catch-all term – variety, simplicity, immediacy, abstraction, silliness – are key elements of what can make a game entertaining. Many minigames achieve little, content to be colourful regurgitation or shortcuts for interaction, but their role is only set to expand. For the near future, at least, minigames can only get bigger.



Some minigames are so slight that they could perhaps be better classified as Easter eggs. Still, a whole feature could be written about largely pointless slot machines in games (such as that seen in *TimeSplitters 3*, above), while *Nanobreaker* turns your map into a weedy shoot 'em up







Free Radical Design

Mention given here not for one game, but two – *Second Sight* and *TimeSplitters 2*. *TS2* hid three carts throughout its levels, all exceedingly retro in presentation: enjoyable multiplayer *Snake*-clone Anaconda (top left), top-down driving game RetroRacer and *Lunar Lander*-a-like AstroLander (above). Once collected, they could be played on your character's PDA, like those also to be found in *Second Sight*, the much less amiable Earth Impact (left) and X Space '92.




Solitaire
Crysis
World Of Warcraft

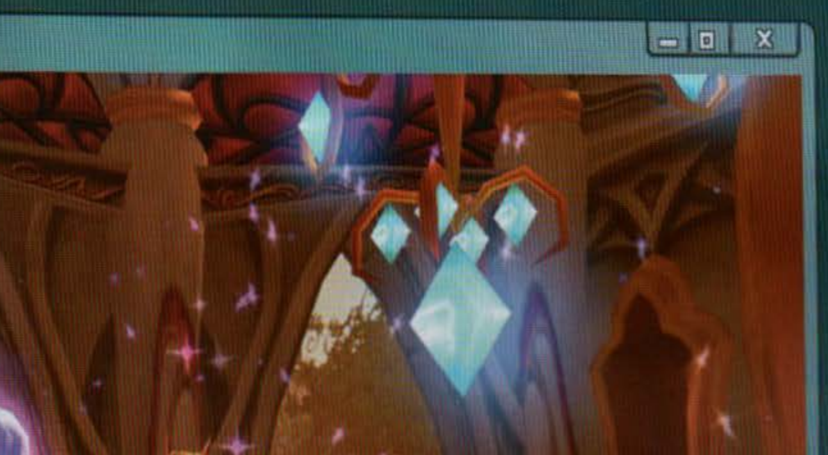


OK COMPUTER?

FORGET CONSOLES: THE WORLD'S TRULY DOMINANT GAMING PLATFORM IS ALREADY SITTING ON YOUR DESK. SO WHY DOES IT SEEM TO BE DOOMED?

Take just the one glance, for instance, at the figures showing that both US and European boxed PC game sales have fallen by approximately ten per cent year-on-year for the last five years. Or at the PC sections of retail stores, as they retreat into ever darker corners, onto ever fewer shelves. Then take a glance at the contents of those shelves: casual cash-ins, budget re-runs, lazy console ports. Could it be any clearer that PC gaming is on the wane?

"This is a pet peeve of mine when I sit down with the analysts. Every time we say: 'Look, you're not doing an effective job of capturing the videogame market in its entirety.'" **Randy Stude**, director of Intel's gaming programme, is far from alone in feeling that an industry increasingly preoccupied with knee-jerk reaction and suggestion has somewhat missed the point.





As pundits continue to discover, there's no single snapshot of PC gaming that captures the entire scene. It isn't one demographic separated by genre preference, or by a measure of enthusiasm such as 360's Gamerzones. You can't draw a line through a single set of figures and panic when, at some point in the future, it passes through zero. This is a dense matrix of different business models and tastes – a truly open market with a potential userbase that approaches a billion people. To appreciate its present, let alone its future, you have to ask far more essential questions than how many Americans and Europeans are raiding Best Buy and Gamestation year on year.

Who, for one, *are* these hundreds of millions of people? Do they game, and if so where? And what do they play? If they don't, then why can't the most flexible gaming platform in the world give them a reason to try? "Every human on this planet is a gamer by nature," notes **Henrique Olifier**, a Brazilian journalist and online entrepreneur now working on *RuneScape*, one of PC gaming's many hidden success stories. "We play with cards, dice, emotions, relationships, politics, races on our way to work, either against other drivers or against the traffic lights... It's all a big game; these elements are everywhere."



In bringing back PC heroes *Sam & Max* one case at a time, Dave Grossman has created a poster boy for episodic delivery

Jason Kapalka, co-founder and chief creative officer of PopCap, has served enough of that great install base – an estimated 200 million when you include his tenure at EA's casual division Pogo – to know how many of those elements exist on PC. "Traditionally, the PC gamer was somebody who played retail CD-ROM games: shooters, realtime strategy, etc. But increasingly it means anyone who simply plays games on a PC, and the avenues are growing and diversifying. You have people who play MMOs almost exclusively, people into online team games like *Counter-Strike*, people downloading independent games from Steam or smaller boutique developers like Battlefront or Stardock, and you have the growing crowd we deal with at PopCap: the mums and seniors who are discovering games that appeal to them in the broadening market."



It's more verbose than it used to be, but critics of Vista's Experience Index will bemoan its lack of detailed reports. That, however, isn't the point – as consumers stumped by PC jargon will agree



Eyes will be following the movements of sure-fire hit *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* in the months following its release. With multiplatform publisher Activision already having sent *Call Of Duty 3* to console, a conversion of id's game looks ever likelier

And this identity crisis is only the first factor which confuses the picture, because even after you've formed an image of the 'who' of PC gaming, you need to start again with a 'where.' China, for example, continues to operate over 200,000 internet cafes, 80,000 of which host 200 PCs or more. Coupling a substantially different ownership model to a different gaming rationale – gamers consistently cite socialising as their prime motivation for play – Asian gaming continues to flourish in ways that questions the very validity of using retail figures as a measure of PC health. Besides *World Of WarCraft* and Korea's *Lineage II*, few of the region's popular titles operate the traditional pay-to-play subscription model in Asia, the region having switched in earnest to a virtual asset purchase (VAP) alternative whereby the game itself is free yet peppered

"TRADITIONALLY, THE PC GAMER PLAYED RETAIL CD-ROM GAMES, BUT INCREASINGLY IT MEANS ANYONE WHO SIMPLY PLAYS GAMES ON A PC"

MASSIVE ATTACK

With the Asian market flooded by MMO titles – from historical RPGs to dancing competitions – and the casual sector in the west so vast that it's almost impossible to cover in its entirety, here's a handful of the most significant examples. They're in no particular order, so unreliable and short-lived are the numbers they often declare, and so diverse the revenue models they employ. Take any figures you read here, then, no matter how astonishing, with a pinch of salt.

AUDITION

Operator **Yedang Entertainment**
Web **www.auditionsea.com**
Model **Virtual Asset Purchase**



A global version of this epic, comic-book-inspired dance-off was shut down due to hacking, though its Asian servers flourish

FREESTYLE

Operator **Level Up! Games**
Web **www.jceworld.com**
Model **Virtual Asset Purchase**



Already under public test in the US, this accessible street basketball title continues to prove hugely popular in the Philippines

GUNBOUND

Operator **Softnyx**
Web **www.gunbound.net**
Model **Virtual Asset Purchase**



A favourite of those with fond memories of *Scorched Earth*, or indeed *Worms*. A US version (dubbed *Revolution*) still operates

KART RIDER

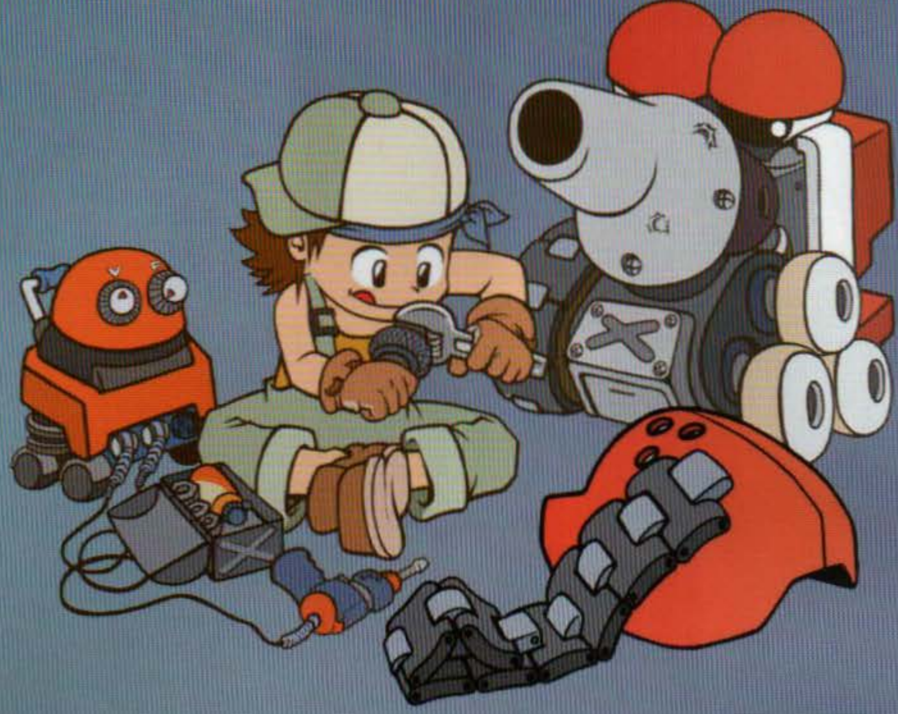
Operator **Nexon**
Web **kart.nexon.com**
Model **Virtual Asset Purchase**



One of the former twin towers of Korean online gaming, alongside *Audition*. Soon to be US-bound with the help of MTV







with advertising and micropayment opportunities. In the *Mario Kart*-esque *Kart Rider* it's cars, weapons and other upgrades; in keyboard-driven dance game Audition it's clothes; in online FPS *Special Force* it's guns and ammo. While the recent drop in local *WOW* subscribers suggests that pay-to-play may have peaked, this new model's growth shows little sign of slowing down. "It does look like people simply like to consume," observes **Florent Castelnerac**, director of Nadeo (makers of the community-driven *TrackMania*). "They like to exist in a community so long as they can buy something that makes them different to others. So in this metaphysical aspect, you could say that the Asian micropayments system is the future of gaming."

The obvious question that's often asked is why the west hasn't taken matters into its own hands. Where is, say, EA's MMO sports title, calculated to seize the Asian initiative? Simple: it's in Asia. Published and developed by local game portal operator Neowiz, *FIFA Online* is considered the first successful example of a boxed retail game (*FIFA 06*, EA Korea's biggest hit) adapted for the online market. Having hit 100,000 peak concurrent users after only 23 days of open beta, the game went on to boast a million subscribers only two months after its May 2006 debut. And, as well as representing the kind of project often overlooked by those making a swift assessment of the PC game business, it shares an important hallmark with this new breed of gaming.

Despite the dominance of *World Of WarCraft* and *Lineage*, this isn't a market dominated by the traditional MMORPG. The region's biggest games (see 'Massive attack') are, for want of a better term, simply MMOGs – reflections of an online enthusiasm that's universal rather than niche, inclusive rather than arcane. Stude's personal favourite is Hanbit Soft's *Groove Party*, and it's easy to see why. With its B-Boy premise, western overtones and motion-captured moves, it's a frontrunner for becoming that golden goose import in America. "I know there are several publishers that are vying to get their hands on it. It's going to cross the divide effectively, and could probably find itself anywhere in the world because it speaks universally through music and dance."



Florent Castelnerac's *TrackMania* series is far from the first to harness its users' creativity, but without doubt one of the best

And this cuts to the heart of the question of PC gaming's future. The potential of the eastern market for western developers is clear, as is the potential for the western market to embrace Asian game styles and financial models. But will these dots ever join up? Some signs are encouraging: in a highly publicised move, MTV recently

THE LEGEND OF MIR 2
Operator **Wemade Ent.**
Web **www.legendofmir.net**
Model **Pay-to-play**



Its sequel holds a Guinness world record for simultaneous players (750,000) but many still play this more storied MMORPG

LINEAGE II
Operator **NCSoft**
Web **www.lineage2.com**
Model **Pay-to-play**



Claimed by NCSoft to have over 14 million 'customers', this traditional fantasy RPG features lovingly designed UE2 visuals

MAPLE STORY
Operator **Wizet**
Web **www.maplestory.com**
Model **Virtual Asset Purchase**



A 2D RPG that found little trouble wooing the west, its Nexon Cash currency has had consistent problems with online fraud

MU ONLINE
Operator **K2 Network**
Web **www.globalmuonline.com**
Model **Free-to-play/pay-to-play**



Popular with the *Diablo* crowd, *Mu* bulges with different item and monster types. Its original operator was developer Webzen

THE CRIMS
Operator **TheCrims.com**
Web **www.thecrims.com**
Model **Free-to-play**



Notorious for its contested claims of over 4 million users and rampant cheating, this stat-heavy MMO is a notable peculiarity

DO YOU COPY?



Together with complications posed by numerous models of distribution and play, the PC industry's ongoing battle with piracy makes monitoring its popularity and financial health difficult. The gradual move to online exclusivity, however, can only help alleviate the problem. Downloads can be recorded, licences distributed and authenticated, hacked clients detected and neutralised, and figures collated with minimal delay. One of the few titles to have made this jump with almost complete success is *TrackMania Sunrise*, one of the PC's most proactive, not to mention impregnable, online hubs.

Controversially, however, the key to that success has been the adoption of StarForce – a wrapper for library files and executables that demands the presence of a legitimate disc before a game can be run. Formerly licensed by Ubisoft as well, the technology has been blamed for crippling incompatible PCs, at a hardware rather than OS level, with its mandatory driver installations. With *TrackMania United* refusing to seek alternative protection, what does Castelnerac make of all this?

"I spend a lot of time on our community forums," he politely explains, "and there's just one group of people that talk about StarForce. It's the group that initially asks: 'Where can I get a crack for *TrackMania*?' And of course they can't because in three years there's never been one. So then it becomes: 'StarForce is shit!' Beyond that, I've never seen anyone who's had a problem, or even noticed it's there.

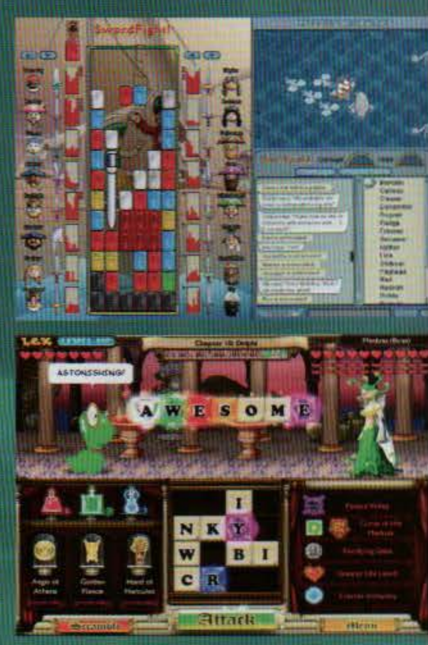
Another of PC gaming's copyright success stories, of course, is Steam. While it has enjoyed its own community backlash for, among other things, demanding an internet connection for traditionally offline games, there's little arguing with the absence of illegal *HL2* installs. While it would be impossible to track the Steam-independent copies if they existed, the protests of disgruntled pirates seem to say it all.

announced its partnership with Nexon to help market several of Asia's biggest online games – *Kart Rider*, *Audition* and *Maple Story* – in the US. But will the west's infrastructure prove compatible?

Freestyle, for example, a 20-million-subscriber monster in Korea, the Philippines and most recently Japan, succeeds because all it needs to infiltrate a new PC is a dash of curiosity and the bandwidth to carry 250mb of basic content – the kind of pipe that feeds into 75 per cent of Korean homes and similar proportions of those in China, Japan, and booming markets such as Vietnam and India. It's an idyllic merger of internet intuitiveness and the freeform dynamism of the PC, its installer little more than a browser popup window, launched by clicking on a giant pulsing button on its homepage. But its western version, which is to be published in the US by Vivendi, is a different ball game: you have to buy it, in a box with a disc and serial number, or acquire a key through the notoriously labyrinthine FilePlanet.

For now, the west is a PC gaming world apart. Where in the east there's a public familiarity with online computing, here there's a learning curve; where there's a natural embrace of micropayments, here there's suspicion. And it's exacerbated by the catch-22 scenario in which games can't properly adopt a micropayments model without removing boxed, full price installers from the package, and can't do that until a functioning micropayments model can mitigate that risk. So instead there's a different online community – one every bit as advanced as the Asian equivalent, but built to supply western demand.

It's best represented by Steam, Valve's pioneering – and still not universally welcomed – content delivery system. Now home to a hundred-odd games, from major brands to idiosyncratic indies, it may not have the mass-appeal of the Asian blockbusters, but it provides something they don't – richness. Steam's roster (see p48 for



Three Rings' *Puzzle Pirates* (top) regularly accommodates ove
5,000 online players at once. PopCap's *Bookworm Adventures* (above) has grander ambitions, as its $700,000 cost shows

"I SEE GAMES ABOUT GARDENING, RESTAURANT MANAGEMENT, DENTAL HYGIENE – ALL KINDS OF STUFF – TO DOWNLOAD AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE"

Gabe Newell's explanation of the service's rationale) provides a vast variety, in price, in style, in game experience – something that PC gaming's champions always claim it can excel at, but something that the Asian model seems unable to supply. And Steam is also pioneering in its approach to another part of the puzzle which seems to be a western innovation: episodic content, from its own *Half-Life 2* addendums to *Sin: Episodes*. Alongside projects such as Telltale's *Bone* and *Sam & Max*, the episodic trend gives PC gaming the chance to be quick to respond to new trends, and more relaxed in the risks it takes with content. "I see games about gardening, restaurant management, dental hygiene – all kinds of peculiar stuff," declares **Dave Grossman**, Telltale's senior designer, "ready to download at a moment's notice, and at prices smaller than an album's worth of music. Games already pepper the internet; they're gradually becoming as ubiquitous as popup ads – sometimes they *are* popup ads."

If Steam is pointing the way, then it's tempting to use it as a new paradigm for PC gaming's decline: PC gaming is dead, long live online gaming. The PC being what it is, however, nothing is quite so simple. In September of last year, Microsoft not only blamed itself for the drop in PC gaming's high street profile, but vowed, with the aid of a considerable war chest, to restore it. "Microsoft has taken some hits, and deservedly so," suggests Stude, "for leveraging games away from PC release windows. I read an interview with Peter Moore where he acknowledged himself that they were very myopic through the Xbox product window."

A massively multiplayer universe with suitably big ideas, CCP'
EVE Online has profited from its early refusal to split its users between separate servers. Its passive realtime skills system also encourages more moderate, staggered playing sessions







Korea juggles online favourites faster than people can keep up, but the improbable success of shooters *Sudden Attack* (pictured) and *Special Force* deserves mention. So efficient are the online tutorials that even genre virgins can jump right in

Even beyond the basic demands of building a brand and seizing territory, it came as little surprise to see Microsoft play favourites between console and computer gaming at the latter's expense. The perception of Microsoft's role in PC gaming all too often lands it with blame for PC gaming's failings rather than the credit for its successes. When a publisher sees fit to release a game unfinished (hardly a freak event) it's Windows that has to break the news of every crash. Despite facilitating practically all PC gaming, it feels all too often like a killjoy, an intruder, or even an opponent. Compare that to a console, where it's nearly always the *game* that freezes and the creator who's at fault.

"Much like how music moved from the radio to the home stereo to the personal player, gaming will trend toward a friendlier format to which the user feels a connection," suggests Human Head's **Jason Blair**. "Sure, PCs are customisable far beyond where consoles are, but the learning curve is steep and most folks don't have the time or energy to fit learning that into their lives. Consoles are easily branded, are working to incorporate all the great things about PCs and PC gaming into their units, and are doing a good job of it. In order for the PC to remain a viable gaming platform, it needs to stake its claim."



But it isn't immediately obvious how, in light of its reduced uniqueness as a gaming platform, the PC is to do that. Blair's take is for it to keep doing what it's doing – to build on its strengths as a customisable infrastructure and workshop for user-generated content. But for Microsoft the watchwords are change and community. With Xbox 360's influence fresh in its mind, it wants to make Windows Vista not just a launch pad for games, in both computing and business terms, but also a home for gamers. Proponents of the Games For Windows initiative – which sees a new standardised approach to boxart, and funds better display areas in stores – laud this apparent aim to give something back, while sceptics are sure to see it as a move to take something away: the ability of games to be free of the Microsoft brand, and the DRM culture that often travels with it.

"Maybe it's a good thing that Microsoft is trying to build the PC as a gaming platform, but let's face it – they're doing it because they want to control it," argues Castelnerac. "Like when I download my movie on Xbox 360 and ask where I can use it, and they say: 'If we can't control it then it's not interesting.'" Still, from a gamer perspective, it's hard not feel optimistic about a programme such as Live Anywhere, the upcoming gaming network that hopes to make Vista the highway that connects console, mobile and PC gaming. And, crucially, Vista also contains one component with the potential to solve a problem that's so far proven intractable: the hardware headache. But more on this later.



AMD's Ian McNaughton would argue that consumers demand bleeding-edge technology. Others might say it's developers

For all Microsoft's efforts to humanise the PC with animated paperclips and personalised folders, the PC remains subject to a factious hardware community, driven by conflicting tribes of technocrats and populists. For many observers, no one embodies the former more than Epic's outspoken president Mark Rein, a man only too happy to turn the hardware debate into a verbal deathmatch. 'Evil' and 'ugly' are both words employed in Rein's diatribes against Intel and its integrated graphics solutions, whose limited graphical performance undermines a PC's ability to deliver elaborate gaming experiences.

Intel's Stude is quick however, to line up the other side of the debate: "Mark is very outspoken, and I think his vision is that every PC should be a gaming PC, or at least





Even with a full understanding of every alternative avenue, it's hard to think future without thinking *Crysis*. Many of the advances made by *Far Cry* have still to be built on by its peers, and there's nothing on the FPS horizon to rival its (true) successor's ambition

one capable of gaming. It's a point of view represented by a very powerful game engine, but there's 60 per cent of the population that sits on integrated graphics machines at work playing casual games. The *Solitaire* crowd does just fine, and doesn't care to play *Gears Of War* and *Unreal Tournament*. That's not something they're ever going to aspire to do. The IT manager who manages 50,000 desktops would say: 'I don't want *anyone* playing games. Don't you dare put an extra $5 onto the cost of that PC, because when I multiply that by 50,000 that's an extra engineer for my staff I can't afford."

"YEARS AGO, GAMERS WEREN'T PLAYING TWO INSTANCES OF AN MMORPG AND ENCODING HD VIDEO WHILE ALSO TALKING VIA SKYPE"

And it's not just games that are pushing PC ambitions. "Console gaming has really accelerated multi-core development and, as much as we have a love/hate relationship with consoles, now that we own ATI and have relationships with Nintendo and Microsoft, it's kinda like we're robbing Peter to pay Paul," admits **Ian McNaughton**, product manager for CPU firm AMD's enthusiast lines. "For [PC] gamers and enthusiasts the usage model has changed. Years ago, gamers weren't playing two instances of an MMORPG; they weren't burning, encoding or transcoding HD video at the same time, while also talking via Skype to their buddies down in Indonesia and messaging their buddies in New York. That's megatasking: the usage model as we see it today and how we see it going forward. It's not about shutting off one thing before starting another."

This, rather than being AMD's vision, is an emerging reality acknowledged and fostered by the company's peers. "Gaming desktops are becoming commonplace in the home," agrees **Abizar Vakharia**, head of gaming at Dell. "The PC will continue its evolution to handle the ever-increasing type and amounts of digital content and entertainment, with systems that can support multi-core processors, multiple hard drives, physics accelerators and quad graphics engines, [offering] a vivid, hi-def entertainment experience. Gaming notebooks are becoming as powerful as most desktops so LAN party enthusiasts can easily carry a lot of firepower on the go."

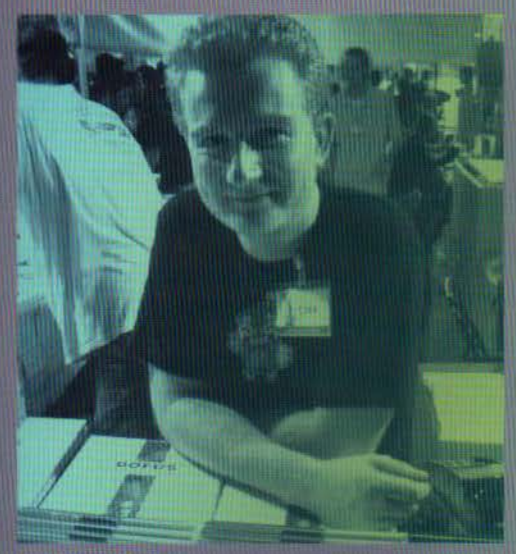
The recent acquisition of graphics chipset manufacturer ATI by AMD is sure to better coordinate the march of PC hardware, and McNaughton is full of reassurance that the company's ties with ATI rival Nvidia are strong, if not stronger than ever. But what these rivals share is a trait many mainstream PC game developers also subscribe to – the need to push the technological boundaries with every new release.

"Developers never really pause to think how much of their audience will follow them on that journey," declares Olifier. "Publishers don't just buy into this trend, they actively encourage it with their

It wasn't a powerhouse processor or pipeline-laden graphics card that put Shuttle's diminutive X100 on this month's cover, or even its conspicuous similarity to Wii. It was its manufacturer's suggestion of it being a great all-rounder, games included. Conventional wisdom would argue that a machine with laptop innards and 512MB of standard RAM was behind the curve, but as you can see from the games featured here, it's more than enough for the majority of PC gamers

MODEL EXAMPLES

The lack of a big name publisher and marketing avalanche doesn't have to indicate a title short of interest. The deceptively low profiles of games such as *Maple Story* are, in a sense, testament to their distractive qualities: people are simply too busy playing to spread the word. Mixing low entry-level requirements with deep content and devoted communities, they're prime examples of how PC gaming needs neither shelve space nor hardware muscle to survive or, as the following success stories demonstrate, diversify.



DOFUS

Developer: **Ankama Studio**
Origin: **France**
Price: **$5 – 6.90 (£2.50 – £3.50) per month**
Population: **80,000 active subscribers (approx)**



Known for its whimsical cartoon aesthetic and loyal fanbase, Ankama's fantasy MMORPG continues to build its world and ruleset without alienating newcomers. Launched in September 2004 (in its native French) and since awarded the Independent Game Festival's Audience Award, it's an internet phenomenon not just on PC, but also on Mac and Linux. Though the bulk of its content, including PVP and pets systems, is reserved for paid members, the free version provides an enchanting tour of its basic professions, classes, items and housing market.

"We decided from the start to orient it for PC," explains product manager **Thomas Bahon** (above), "and never did we have in mind to make it for a console platform. Everything was thought up for an internet environment: the gameplay, the way the game was to be distributed, the save system, and even its weight [the installer is less than 100Mb]. Actually, if possible we would have made it installation-free. Our objective was to dematerialise the game as much as we could.

"To some people, having to install from multiple CDs is a really big obstacle, enough to stop them from even attempting to play PC games. We saw this first hand: not only did we get new MMORPG players, but also people who had simply never played a PC game before."



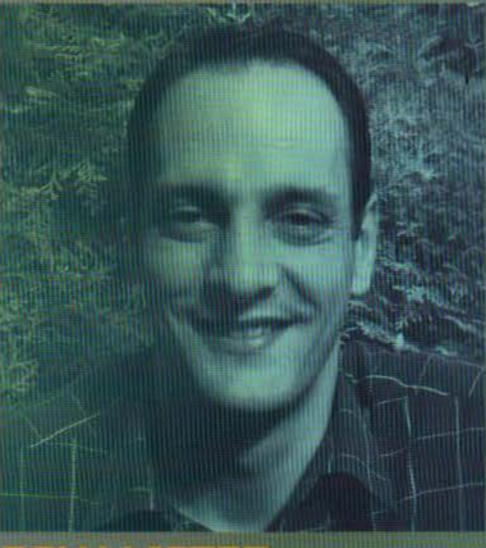
RUNESCAPE

Developer: **Jagex**
Origin: **UK**
Price: **£3.20 per month**
Population: **850,000 active subscribers, five million active free users (approx)**



Built by brothers Andrew and Paul Gower and famously operated, at first, from a server in their parents' house, this Java-based MMORPG operates independently of platform or OS: all it needs is a machine capable of browsing moderately demanding web pages. Now hosted by over 130 servers worldwide (each its own self-contained world) and maintained by 330 staff, the game has enjoyed several updates to its rudimentary 3D engine, in-game advertising ensuring that playing for free (minus premium content) is still an option.

Play consists of traditional grinding, trade, NPC and PVP combat, though *RuneScape*'s refusal to adopt any class system has made it especially hospitable to casual players. "Since its early stages," recalls head of content Olifier (above), "*RuneScape* was conceived with two elements in mind: gameplay and accessibility. It's designed to be simply fun and available anywhere, to anyone. This mindset is so deeply rooted in the project that it's repeatedly fed into the content during its ongoing development. Concepts were tried, ideas tested, lessons learned – and every step into the right direction resulted in more players enjoying its world. It's been shaped it into something that can be enjoyed by kids, parents, boys, girls, casuals and hardcore gamers alike."



ROMA VICTOR

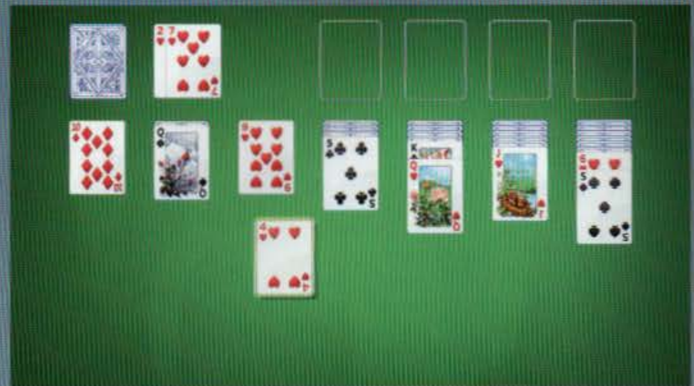
Developer: **RedBedlam**
Origin: **UK**
Price: **£20 (one-time fee), plus additional virtual assets (£1 = 500 Sesterces)**
Population: **5,000 (approx)**



Unique in its strict focus on historical authenticity, this full scale recreation of Roman Europe boasts a revenue model seldom employed by either eastern or western MMORPGs, real-world currency translating directly into in-game wealth. Grinding through the day-to-day tasks of a slave, barbarian or citizen represents an alternative, more traditional source of income, the lack of a monthly subscription fee ensuring better value for its more transient visitors.

"In a way, we knew we would be on the periphery of the MMORPG market," says communications director **Nick Witcher** (above). "But we also knew there was a massive audience out there that follows ancient history, especially Roman history. We soon realised that our demographic is very different to the typical MMO game: they're smart people, interested in the classics and with a disposable income. That demographic is significant, because kids with the latest kick-ass gaming PCs probably won't be able to afford to play *RV* as well.

"A few members of the community that joined back in 2002 even went on to launch their own history reference website. It's now one of the leading sites of reference for history teachers and secondary schools – www.unrv.com (United Nations of Roma Victor)."





Mahjong Titans (above) is one of several newcomers to be installed alongside Vista's consumer editions. Its entirely scalable visuals may seem surprisingly attractive, as might those of the returning *Solitaire* (left), but XP took similar pride in its casual ensemble

buzzwords. Nowadays it seems like if a game doesn't feature transform or lighting effects, it is not a game at all. We need waves, generations of PCs, and not this hybrid soup of endless configurations."

"The divide between the discrete graphics and integrated graphics side of things is too wide," agrees Stude, "and the best way to get to some normalcy isn't by arguing whether every consumer wants to play games, but rather by delivering a standard [whereby] the industry can point to something and say: 'This is a PC that's capable of game play.' And if a consumer elects to buy a system that doesn't carry that mark, or whatever it is, then they can understand that, when it comes to games, they're on their own." And this is where, says Microsoft, Windows Vista steps in. Given that the hardware industry won't change overnight, and in its most notorious habits will likely never change at all, the Windows Experience Index is something of an interim measure, but also a noble one.

The Index is a series of five PC performance benchmarks, each graded from 1 to 5.9, the lowest figure determining the computer's overall base score. For what is a comprehensively demanding, unquestionably attractive OS, the old hi-fi enthusiast's adage still applies: your PC is only as good as its weakest component. The subject of early scepticism for its vague definitions of precisely what was being evaluated, the final version of the Index paints a valid and, importantly, coherent picture of how efficiently the various chips and boards of a Vista-ready PC interact. Gaming graphics performance is mentioned individually, with a 5-grade system considered top-end.

"If you've got a graphics card that's two or three years old," says Stude, "and you pick up a game box, you're expected to know not only what graphics card you have in your system, but also what it's capable of doing: can it do DirectX 9.0c? Heck if I know, right? More times than not, consumers are basically taking a chance when they're buying a PC game.

"What we'd like to see is a scenario where a consumer looks at the box and they know it's going to work. Hopefully that changes the financial norm in the PC publishing business that says that somewhere around 28 per cent of PC games are factored for returns when the publisher fills out their financial statements. That compares to 10 per cent for consoles, and therein lies the problem. It has nothing to do with integrated graphics or discrete graphics, or Nvidia, AMD or ATI individually; collectively, we've got some work to do."

Accordingly, fashioning the Windows Experience Index into something beneficial to the consumer is a mutual responsibility of Microsoft and the software industry, but with the exceptions of its closest partners, Redmond has little to no control over how publishers quantify the performance of their games when applying Vista's metric. "There're gonna be mistakes and there's gonna be some trouble," concedes McNaughton, "but I think the overarching goal is still valid. I agree that there'll be people who'll take advantage of it and people that have their own monetary profit in mind, but there'll also be developers who want to make sure their customers have the best experience. It's certainly better than what we have today."

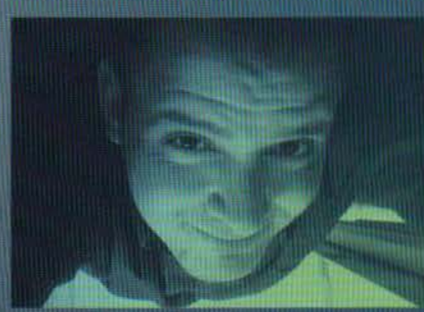
Yet, as PC gaming tackles the spectre of outmoded business models and alienating hardware, a new problem raises its head: does this skew towards casual gaming, and towards lower-end hardware, mean that the hardcore gaming experience will be squeezed on to consoles? How, you might ask, does Activision find time to port *Call Of Duty 3* to Wii and PS2 but not to its

"THE INDUSTRY IS LABELLING PEOPLE WITH THE HARDWARE AND SKILLS NEEDED TO RUN GAMES AS 'GAMERS', AND EVERYONE ELSE AS 'CASUAL'"

CRY-TECH



Without clear-cut jumps between generations, the spending patterns of the PC gaming hardcore tend to be dictated by milestones in either software or hardware evolution. With its raft of supporting technologies and impending showcase titles, there couldn't be a more compelling (or demanding) example than the arrival of DirectX 10. Meeting its bar can require a considerable hardware overhaul – one that DX10 advisory board member and Crytek president **Cevat Yerli** (above) is happy to outline. The following, he stressed, would form the basis of a 'DX10 experience rig' and does not necessarily reflect the needs of *Crysis*. "If you want to run a true DX10 game, you should have a dual-core CPU released in the last six months, or better still a quad-core one. You'll want 2GB of dual-channel RAM, together with an SLI setup of DX10 graphics cards. If you have a living room setup and, let's say, a 360 controller hooked up, this'll certainly impress *any* console gamer."



Together with co-founders John Vechey and Brian Fiete, Jason Kapalka (pictured) made PopCap a casual household name





Human Head's Jason Blair actually heads up its card adventure game studio, the PC's ties to traditional gaming still in place

birthplace, which incidentally is still more than capable of hosting the 360 version? What happens if *Command & Conquer 4* is announced as a 360 exclusive, or whichever MMO keenly follows *Age Of Conan* to Xbox Live? Will PC lose again?

"Few people realise how good for the PC this actually is," insists Olifier, unexpectedly. "Every single new generation sparks a move of titles from the PC into consoles; this is nothing new. *Oddworld* and *Fallout* went to Xbox, *Baldur's Gate* and *The Sims* to the PS2. The list goes back to the '80s, as far as *Elite* moving from the BBC to the NES or *Metal Gear* from the MSX to the PlayStation. Sure, you might feel disappointment, maybe even sadness, at your favourite series migrating from your monitor to your television, but think about the PC and the games it nurtures. The PC as a gaming platform creates new genres, makes them successful and often sees them travel to other platforms when they have hit a certain level of success. Those games leave when the genre is already massively exploited, soon to become stale and boring. When those blockbuster franchises leave, they make room for innovation as smaller creative teams have their chance to debut and bring something new to the scene, taking advantage of that void."

But how to steer through that void? How should PC developers judge a market which is now governed by unfamiliar features – episodic content, VAP, the Windows Experience Index and direct distribution? "It comes down to the inability to truly grasp what's going on with the players," continues Olifier. "The industry must throw away the old labels, outdated knowledge, marketing cash-in formulas and truly grasp the backbone of our business – the consumer. Take a look at this simple example: Would you label players of old-school text-based adventures or *Nethack* as casual gamers? Of course not. But a publisher would. This huge chunk of the market is being mostly served by sub-standard cash-in licensed games that let new users down upon their first contact with this media, preventing their evolution as consumers toward more advanced products.

"What the industry is currently doing is simple and in my opinion dumb: it is labelling people with the hardware and technical skills needed to run games as 'gamers', and everyone else as 'casual'. The missing key is accessibility. Give *Minesweeper* and *Solitaire* players a better game, equally easy to reach and use, and they will buy it. Just don't ask them to download or struggle with settings, patches, drivers, or configurations. Make it easy, and useable, and the target will be hit."

And there's no shortage of evidence to support such a claim. Games like *Maple Story*, the browser-based MMORPG which gets more attention on GameFAQs than even *World Of WarCraft*, or *Bookworm Adventures*, PopCap's attempt to introduce more elaborate gaming mechanics into its word-search puzzler, show how these new trends can be blended together to create new experiences, funded in new ways, which reach out to this vast new market. So is PC gaming obsolete? Yes, perhaps, but only as a phrase: the spectrum of gaming it represents is now too widely spread to bear such a simple label.

And that's what explains the conundrum of how PC gaming is perceived: it's the difference between an industry that's disintegrating and one that's simply shedding its skin, ready to take on its newer, stronger form.



Ever since the release of Windows 95 and its *Space Cadet Pinball*, Microsoft has enjoyed tossing the odd stranger into its suite of traditional casual games. *Purble's Palace*, however, defies even that precedent. Its collection of cartoon minigames include a bakery and face-building game

Prior to the announcement that it was heading to 360, Funcom's *Age Of Conan* (above) was considered a classic example of a PC exclusive – epic, online, and played via mouse and keyboard. *Final Fantasy XI*, however, should have been a omen

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Viva Piñata



Snaring sceptics at every turn, the riotous colours of Rare's thumb-twiddler are the perfect antidote to bleak January nights and the perfect lull for weary gamer brains
360, MICROSOFT

42 All Time Classics



It's simple: no train journey will ever be attempted again without this essential survival kit. Cancellations, overcrowding and delays pale in its presence
DS, NINTENDO

F-Zero GX



It may not shine the brightest of Nintendo's consoles, but *F-Zero* has the speed, the colour and the flair to make firing up a GameCube as exciting as it was the first time
GAMECUBE, SEGA

One in, one out

Playing favourites can be a painful business



No matter how much the real estate round your TV is at a premium, could you really countenance locking *Space Channel 5*'s Ulala in a wardrobe?

Nothing more than a box. Sitting half-buried under the Christmas tree, the regularity of its dimensions should make it the most anonymous of presents. But even without a label, even without giving it an exploratory heft, there's no doubting what it is.

And then, an hour – a day, a week – later, the unwrapping. Sellotape neatly slit, end-flap teased open so as not to buckle the cardboard. Next, laid out squarely on the carpet: manual, cables, power lead, batteries, controller. Growing in the corner, a heap of polystyrene, crumpled plastic and stray pink and yellow sheets of weird warnings, all thick with a smell of chemical newness.

There's nothing quite like a new console – nothing quite like one at Christmas, when it's only a matter of time until the bustle dies down and enough sozzled aunties and over-tired toddlers have dozed off that you can reclaim control of the telly. And then months of waiting come down to that intake of breath before you hear *that* start-up noise for the first time. It's a moment ripe with potential, your brain running ahead to the games in store, the games you know you don't know, the games you won't know until you play them.

But then as Boxing Day sees the empty boxes stacked on wardrobes, things start to feel a little different. A permanent home must be found for the new machine, and that means freeing a plug-point, fussing over AV inputs – facing up to the snarl of cables under the TV. And so your eye falls on the GameCube. Obsolete now, surely, since your Wii can do it all. Except your hand falls back, as you're suddenly assailed by memories of sneaking downstairs an hour before work to check in on *Animal Crossing*, of late nights chasing locked doors through *Metroid Prime*, of calling someone in to share a page of Olimar's diary.

So, Dreamcast, then? Be honest. It's a year or more since you turned it on, and more than that since you sat down for more than a ten-minute nostalgia fix. And so it's back to the wardrobe to find something to stack it all in: a neat tower of *Rez, Soul Calibur, Space Channel 5, Metropolis Street Racer* – years of play, hundreds of evenings in with friends and partners, dozens of parties, another Christmas morning, another heart-breaking decision.

Nothing more than a box.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



METAL GEAR SOLID: PORTABLE OPS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£21) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS) PREVIOUSLY IN: E164







Snake's suit must have looked cool on paper, but on-screen he appears to be wearing either a tight pair of waders or black rubber tights, and perhaps to be carrying a few more pounds around his hips than a svelte super-spy should

Portable Ops has been fêted like a returning war hero in the *Metal Gear*-obsessed US, where it's welcomed not only as the latest bona fide episode in the *Metal Gear* mythos, but also as nothing less than a validation for the PSP's existence. Here, goes the argument, is what we were promised all along, but what the machine has consistently failed to deliver: big-budget, bespoke versions of the big names, imaginatively tailored to the handheld hardware's unique strengths, but still offering all the widescreen ambition and slick production values of a home console experience.

You can't take that away from *Portable Ops*; it certainly is that much, and more besides. You can, however, question whether it is a classic game in its own right, indeed whether it's even as successful an experiment with *Metal Gear*'s unstable formula as 2004's baroque, barking mad *Snake Eater*. Despite the sighs of relief that greeted the news of the series' return to stealth action on PSP after the card-battle abstraction of the *Metal Gear Acid* games, purists should beware: *Portable Ops* is still something of a bizarre hybrid, scrapping Snake's solo adventuring in favour of a Comrade system of capturing, recruiting and deploying teams of allies that recalls *Pokémon*, of all things.

Set in 1970, a few years after *Snake Eater*, *Portable Ops* stars that game's Naked Snake – now bearing the resonant title of Big Boss – as a renegade agent, retired from FOX and framed for that unit's treachery. FOX is hatching plans with ex-Soviet forces at a secret base in Central America, and Snake must defeat FOX to clear his name, avert thermonuclear catastrophe, and further entangle himself in the multiple threads of historical conspiracy and tragicomic super-soldier soap opera that Hideo Kojima so likes to weave. As such, the story will likely enthral devotees of the *Metal Gear* universe, and baffle everyone else. It's certainly drier in tone than the gloriously camp *Snake Eater*, and suffers as badly as previous *Metal Gears* from long stretches of turgid exposition. But the stylish, comic-style cutscenes – composed from Ashley Wood's passionate monochrome artwork, animated with economy and elegance – make a refreshing, pace-quickening change.



Although the interface has some huge flaws, the presentation is never less than crisp and classy, as you would expect. The sound-based radar is especially great, with oscilloscope quivers that show the noise you and those around you make



> Despite the sighs of relief that greeted the series' return to stealth action, Portable Ops is still something of a bizarre hybrid

The game itself, whilst mechanically very familiar, is structurally quite a departure. It's broken down into location-specific missions that can be completed in a matter of minutes with foreknowledge and planning (or alternatively, a bit of luck and blind haste). Injured Green Beret Roy Campbell ferries Snake between locations in a truck that serves as base of operations for the squads you assemble by knocking out enemy soldiers and staff, and dragging them back to the lorry or a comrade's hiding spot. Once converted, they can be deployed back into the action in one of four sneaking squads of four, assigned to spy on any location in the game to gather intel (be it plot-specific or a matter of item locations), or placed in the engineering and medical departments that generate items and squad buffs. A sneaking squad can only be moved one character at a time to assigned cardboard-box hiding places; characters dressed as the enemy can wander in the open as long as they don't do anything suspicious, which would a be huge, game-changing advantage if the game didn't decide when their cover was broken in such an arbitrary, impossible-to-predict fashion.

It's a fascinating design, a rich twist on traditional *Metal Gear Solid* that actually and



The PSP's screen has forced a welcome change to an over-the-shoulder thirdperson view, but sadly the camera still remains *Metal Gear*'s greatest Achilles heel. Tight, imprecise and unresponsive, it's all too easy to be surprised, and too hard to scout ahead













The item-selection interface (right) is as elegant as ever, but the system itself is much changed. Each character can now carry only four items, making item distribution and management a key element, and something of a pain

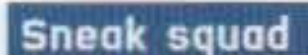
finally delivers on the 'tactical' part of the old 'tactical espionage action' tagline. A wide range of character skills, which from combat proficiencies to buffs and unique talents (artists are, in an all-to-rare flash of Kojima's arch humour, 'impervious to dirty magazines') add a JRPG-like depth to party composition and make recruitment a compulsive obsession. How unfortunate, then, that the implementation is so cumbersome, so bogged down in the dogged severity and pace-killing complication that have always hidden behind *Metal Gear*'s slick façade. In-mission recruitment is a tremendous hassle that trebles the difficulty of a level; squad deployment a slow, painstaking process that leaves you looking at the map screen for as long as the action. If a character that's not plot-critical is defeated in action, they're lost for good, a decision that sounds like an appealing challenge in theory but, in practice, forces an incredibly conservative play style and multiple mission abandons and restarts, destroying much of the good work done to break the game down into commute-compatible chunks.

Portable Ops' saving grace is in its alternative recruitment methods, the aspect of the game that most clearly displays Kojima Prodcutions' postmodern wit and talent for taking games out of themselves. You can trade comrades with other players ad-hoc or online, win them from other players in multiplayer matches (see 'Sneak squad') or virtual 'cyber-survival' battles, and best of all, physically go out and harvest them from any wifi access point, whether you have access to it or not. There's a similar system for the PSP's new GPS Receiver device; these modes considerably ease the pain of recruitment and explode the possibilities of internet and portable gaming in a way that's often been talked about, but that few studios have had the daring and vision to actually achieve.

Extravagant and uncompromising, with its head high in the clouds and feet deep in the mud, *Portable Ops* manages to be both a true original and quintessential *Metal Gear*. Like most of its predecessors it will be revered by the fans but quite inaccessible to newcomers, especially since it lacks the tight focus and dramatic flair of the series at its best. It's a superb fit for its format, and despite its frustrations never less than absorbing, but a thorough rethink of the interface and the implications of its innovative design might have made it effortlessly so, and turned it into the standard-bearer PSP needs.

[7]

Sneak squad





A large part of *Portable Ops*' incredibly full use of the PSP's capabilities lies in the online and ad-hoc multiplayer modes. While the maps are for the most part excellent and the options suite comprehensive, the gametypes – deathmatch, team deathmatch, capture and team capture – are somewhat basic and ill-suited to *Metal Gear*'s methodical, slow-paced play style, its strength in stealth and its somewhat unresponsive controls. They are easily overshadowed by Ubisoft's excellent exploration of multiplayer stealth in the *Splinter Cell* games. Games can either be 'real' (defeated comrades are lost to the winner) or 'virtual', where your soldier collection is not at risk, but the dangerous excitement of the former is badly compromised by the no-risk option to wave a white flag and keep your men. The random, automated battles of cyber-survival are a much more efficient, and surprisingly compelling, way to earn recruits.



Technically accomplished, *Portable Ops* is nonetheless a rather drab game. *Metal Gear* has always had a cool palette and restrained visual style, but the locations here are sorely lacking in glamour or atmosphere, and some of the animation is surprisingly awkward





ELEBITS

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: ¥6,090 (£26)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E166



The game has three very different graphical styles – there's the homely chunkiness of the game world, the unsettlingly hairy renders of the Elebits themselves, and the pastel-soft charm of the cutscenes which tell the main story



Elebits might just be the archetypal Wii game, but not for the reasons you think.

It's not for the control scheme, although the game's FPS roots graft easily onto the Remote and Nunchuck. Armed only with a gravity zapper, *Elebits*' charmingly doleful hero must rouse the world's electricity supply from the enchanted sleep that his ill-considered wishes have unleashed on it. This being a videogame, the world's electricity supply takes the form of some magnificently ugly creatures who snore in drawers and under plant-pots. As he finds them he restores the available electricity supply – the more watts he finds, the more electrical devices he can switch back on, and switching things back on frees the Elebits who were trapped inside them. These power up his gravity gun, allowing him to lift and shake heavier objects, which in turn wakes more Elebits, which switches more things on, which triggers a unstoppably satisfying vicious circle of increasing chaos as you ransack first bedroom, then house, then garden, then town, then amusement park.

And that chaos is the other reason you might think this a hallmark Wii title. While it has long been apparent that the console doesn't need graphical grunt to power its vision of inclusive gaming, smart developers, Konami among them, have long argued that it's a console for which highly competent physics processing is uniquely important. The Wii's control scheme gives you the ability to reach into the game world, and *Elebits* is a perfect demonstration of how much that makes you want to grab and poke and pry at what you find there, and of just how satisfying it is when you find that you can. As physics models go, it's sensibly simple and magnificently robust. This isn't an attempt to match the ambitions of LucasArts' digital molecular matter; it's a fun-house full of blocks to throw around and pile in preposterous towers. But, while chairs won't splinter and curtains won't burn, drawers will open and table lamps can be tucked away in ovens. For gamers who grew up with games where 'furniture' was a word you used to describe the non-interactivity of the things you saw, it's a wonderfully ironic realisation of a long-held dream.

> The Wii lets you reach into the game world, and Elebits is a perfect demonstration of how that makes you want to poke at what you find there

The limited but useful implementation of the physics is matched by the game's visual presentation, another factor you might think makes it a defining Wii title. There's enormous charm in the darkened, deserted suburban paradise the game depicts, but little to amaze. The clarity, however, is exceptional, with the nature and purpose of every single one of the thousands of objects and structures apparent at a glance. But what's most striking is the balance between the charismatically weird Elebits themselves and the carefully-calibrated blandness of the rest of the game's design. This is a world calculated to alienate as few people as possible, and its immense normality plays a great part in the game's success. For years, the industry has been clumsily obsessing over how to make games for women, but there can be few housewives (of either sex) who won't find a liberating

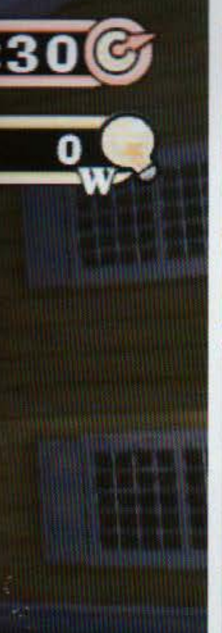
Multiplayer is very neatly calibrated, giving each player a distinctive reticule, and granting the person with the Nunchuck control over movement without disadvantaging his opponents too severely. And, should you feel it's still an unfair edge, there's a handicap system to balance it

Trading places



The Wii controls are at their most crucial in *Elebits*' secret weapon – its level design mode. Once any location has been completed in the main game, it becomes available as a blank slate for player deviousness. Every object in the game can be placed, rotated and nudged with exaggerated care, and the interface is fast and intuitive. Once you've stacked the cupboards with teetering towers of teacups, and lined the skirting boards with tanks, you can send your levels to your friends to play. As ever with a good level editor, playing with the game is almost as entertaining as playing against it; sometimes it really can be as much fun to create as it is to destroy.

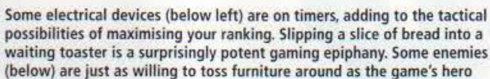












Some electrical devices (below left) are on timers, adding to the tactical possibilities of maximising your ranking. Slipping a slice of bread into a waiting toaster is a surprisingly potent gaming epiphany. Some enemies (below) are just as willing to toss furniture around as the game's hero









Later levels are populated by enemies, from weird dinosaur-plated slug-creatures to good old-fashioned gun emplacements. Projectiles travel nice and slowly, giving ample time to dodge, and many assailants can be cheerily chucked into a hedge



elation in absolutely trashing a child's immaculate bedroom, and frisbeeing every plate in the cupboard off the kitchen walls. Gaming's wish fulfilment potential has usually been limited to fast cars and big guns: *Elebits* shows just how untapped that wishlist really is.

But here's what really makes *Elebits* a milestone Wii title: there's no reason, no reason whatsoever, that it couldn't have been made on an existing console. There's no doubt that the Remote is a more palatable introduction to FPS controls than a pad or keyboard, but there's not one single aspect of *Elebits'* design that couldn't have been produced on a PS2 or a GameCube; it's just that no one would have tried. For all the mechanical innovations the Wii may bring, its biggest potential might yet prove to be nothing more technical than simply legitimising game ideas that would previously have been rejected out of hand for being 'not what gamers want'.

And the proof of how normal a game *Elebits* secretly is comes in its structure. A series of timed challenges, rankings, secondary objectives and annoying boss battles – this is a traditional game through and through. And, while *Katamari Damacy* is an obvious comparison point, *Elebits* gets more variety out of its peaceable violence by setting arbitrary restrictions on your actions – don't make too much noise, don't break more than five vases – which add strategic depth to your enthusiastic ransacking. Levels can be slightly long hauls – 15 minutes can be a long time to point your arm at the screen if you're a more dynamic Wii player – but all the standard challenges give you the option to quit out as soon as your main objective is completed, leaving the rest of the time for the stronger obsessive-compulsives.

Despite the charm, and despite the sophistication, there's no disguising that *Elebits* is a slightly thin idea. Although the locations get grander and the destruction more alluring, there's little evolution in the task at hand. Assured, imaginative and genuinely unique, *Elebits* points a way forward for the Wii which is no more dependent on crazy control schemes than it is on Nintendo's own development teams. **[7]**



Some of the greatest fun produced with your gravity gun comes when the game takes the audaciously simple step of switching the gravity off. As the items you tear loose start to clog the air, progress gets trickier and the sense of wanton destruction gradually more giddy



FAR CRY VENGEANCE

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (UBISOFT MONTREAL)



Far out



It's not uncommon for a launch window title to strip itself to the bone to expedite development, but *Vengeance*'s multiplayer modes, limited to twoplayer versions of *Instincts*' Chaos and Predator gametypes, could be accused of taking the practice a step too far. The assignment of such enormous maps to one-on-one duelling is unquestionably absurd, the action showing few signs of either QA testing or designer enthusiasm. Needless to say, neither the mapmaking toolset nor comprehensive online support of *Instincts* feature, the irony being that the limits placed on custom map size by Wii hardware might well have made them better.

Far Cry Vengeance should present you with a tropical paradise gone wrong. What it actually presents you with is a tropical paradise gone very wrong – something that looks and feels about as outdated as a first-generation title can. To atone, it tries to make its rolling landscape as expansive and explorable as possible, but the subsequent over-exertion of Wii hardware sees it chug to the point where you can almost feel it in your gut. Of all the titles to find their way on to wholly unsuited platforms, this one's a standout.

Its storyline, to make matters worse, is almost non-existent. Beyond the standard trawls between spawn- and checkpoints there's nothing to compare it to Ubisoft's *Instincts* or even Crytek's PC original. Jack Carver's feral mutations continue to play a major role, and to the game's credit the famed ability to stream open environments does also. But while the maps are big, the need to explore them is not.

In an affront to a licence that once prided itself on AI smarts, enemies here are nothing short of laughable. The various explosive objects – which, in *Far Cry*, might have caught an enemy's ear or buried them under a chain reaction of falling masonry – do nothing. At all. Blow one up right next to a patrol outpost and your adversaries will resolutely stand stock still. One might then say, "I think I saw something!" as you creep up and shoot them in the back of the head.

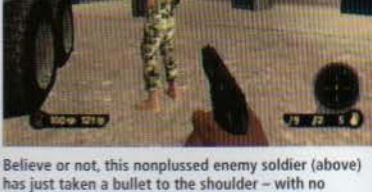
Given the opportunity to flank you or overwhelm you with their numbers, alerted enemies have an intriguing habit of lining up and making your job easier. This, perhaps, is the saving grace of a game that begs to be completed as soon as possible, its characters so badly hobbled by arthritic animations that they'll even lunge desperately into the firing line of a mounted gun emplacement.

In fact, if you are overpowered it's more often down to clumsiness of control. Pressing the A button will lock your head in position while the Remote moves the reticule, but the problem is more one of sensitivity than intuitiveness. Worse still, if you happen to be in a situation that requires you to look at the floor, straightening up requires a violent thrust of the reticule past the point at which gun movement becomes head movement.

Furthermore, in a truly horrendous sound mix, the most distant of enemy soldiers will utter their doggedly monotonous lines as though they were standing right next to you. In a series that still extols stealth tactics over run-and-gun, it's a dizzying annoyance. Music, meanwhile, kicks in to alert you to nearby foes before entering a contemptible loop that asks to be muted altogether.

Rather than the big ideas that Ubisoft Montreal brought so enthusiastically to *Instincts*, *Vengeance* feels like a small-minded attempt to corner the Remote-controlled shooter market at the earliest opportunity. *Red Steel* may have failed in a similar bid, but at least it had the excuse of being a new franchise, not one already established. **[3]**





Believe or not, this nonplussed enemy soldier (above) has just taken a bullet to the shoulder – with no noticeable effect. It takes him a good three or four seconds to turn around and notice you standing behind him, by which time he's been deservedly executed

The machete is the first weapon found in the game, and remains pretty effective throughout. Because gun wounds have very little visible impact, it's nice to be able to spray some blood across the screen







Characters look extremely angular from a distance, but aren't actually all that bad once you get up close. They're still mostly comparable with the kinds of things the PS2 and Xbox were displaying quite some time ago, however



Your first port of call will be to switch the voices to Japanese, if only to make the girls sound slightly less like twittering, wind-up dollies. The soundtrack is as perfectly sunny and bouncy a line-up as that of the original game, however

DEAD OR ALIVE XTREME 2

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £45 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT/TECMO DEVELOPER: TEAM NINJA
PREVIOUSLY IN: E169

It may have vanished from the game's title, but the volleyball hasn't gone. Instead, it's lost its prominence within the line-up of activities awaiting the *Dead Or Alive* girls as they flounce their way around an idyllic, unconditional fortnight on an island resort where the only man in existence is the screwball playboy owner. Once again taking *DOA* from the realm of the beat 'em up to the beatific climes of New Zack Island, it remains a game about two things, and not necessarily the two that a quick glance suggests. But the first is most definitely that very one-dimensional eroticism: the infamous trademark jiggle of virtual mega-breasts, which now sees each girl's chest flop around in a doubly ridiculous manner at the slightest body movement. That forefront of titillation can't be overlooked, but it doesn't mean that all its players are leering at it: aside from being labelled as kitten-soft porn Club 15-18 for desperate teenage males, they're hard to see as sexy in spite of the Sapphic intro sequence or the intimate camera control offered while watching the girls lounge on the beaches in shoelace bikinis. These are gaming's own answer to seaside postcard bimbos, and *DOAX* its Club Tropicana.

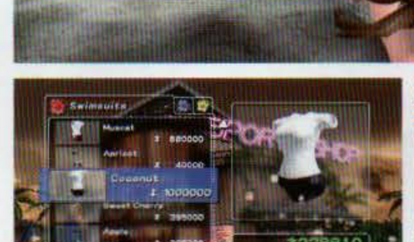


Thanks to the visual style of the *Dead Or Alive* ladies – unblemished Barbie skin, creaseless joints and android faces – it's hard to spot the difference between their 360 forms and those on Xbox, however much horsepower is behind them. Certain, more elaborate swimsuits (above) show more flair this time around, though

Which brings us to that second aspect: a vacuous vacation it may be, but it's a glorious and endearingly daft experience, from the cocktail of sunsets to the play structure that's as aimless as you like. There's still two-on-two volleyball to be had, and wooing other girls into becoming partners remains an option, but it's now a game that's much less dependent on coupling, with none of its new activities demanding a teammate. And forget the nudge-nudge jokes about one-handed gaming: this teeters on one-thumb gaming. With the exception of jetski races (see 'Pleasant swells'), the new events – sprints, tugs of war, water slides and 'Butt Battles' (basically mini-Sumo played out purely by bum shunts) – all seem initially wonderful and brilliantly silly, but drain all too quickly. The one upshot is that it's now easier to build up money to splash out on things to wear – the game's only true goal – but the huge investment of time required to amass enough of a collection to start playing freestyle dress-up is still excessive enough to endanger what depths of delight there are. And the chance to expand the game in a manner that'll reward those holidaymakers appreciative of the game's laid-back existence hasn't been capitalised on; the myriad items up for purchase still feel uselessly inert, and could have done with some Easter egg-style detail to make them more than just collectibles or gifts.

In between the judgemental and the judged-to-be-mental, some will still find *DOAX 2* to be soothingly directionless or charmingly goofy, a game that feels numbingly pointless when treated like other games. But, if this is your second visit to Zack Island, you may well find yourself wasting fewer hours than expected, rather than many more. **[5]**







The Achievements would have been ideal for nudging wandering players around with awards based on just one character. Instead, they centre on collecting swimsuits and friends for all the girls. The Casino (above right) returns, with blinding lights and four games that offer some classic gambling after sundown

Pleasant swells



Jetski races are as significant an aspect of *DOAX 2* as the once-titular volleyball, one of the lengthier activities to be had, but by no means long-lasting. Races take place along a handful of courses staged around the never-choppy coastline, on glittering stretches of water and with vehicle handling that's pliant and dependable but not something you'll be wanting – or needing – to eke much subtlety out of. The variety within the courses is far from great, and tricks are simplistic, though a generous moneyspinner and rarely frustrating in terms of challenge. But, like anything in the *DOAX* universe, treat it like a typical risk/reward videogame activity instead of a device for dabbling and you'll quickly grow tired of grinding away on those laps.

Drivers flail out of vehicles if you hit them just right. It's a bit disconcerting that, despite areas being well lit, drivers always appear only as shadowy silhouettes.



Heavier weapons such as missiles and lasers can be fun, acting a little bit like the homing shells of *Mario Kart*: excellent for when the race leader is smugly assuring themselves of victory





FULL AUTO 2: BATTLELINES

FORMAT: PS3 (VERSION TESTED), PSP PRICE: £45 (PS3) £35 (PSP) RELEASE: MARCH 30 PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: PSEUDO INTERACTIVE (PS3), DEEP FRIED ENTERTAINMENT (PSP)

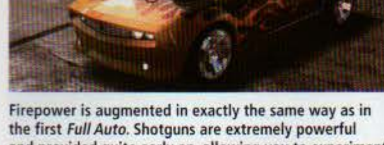
Not so much a bona fide sequel as an expanded port, much of *Full Auto 2: Battlelines* might have been better presented as a suite of downloadable extras for the original game. It recycles so many of its cars, weapons and environments that it smacks a little of laziness, unfairly casting the PS3 as a machine playing catch-up with what the 360 offered a year ago.

As such, the series' goal of arming *Burnout* to the teeth remains unchanged. Unrelentingly fast and genuinely furious, each of its new stages provides either a racing challenge, demolition job, or a combination of both. To the game's credit, they fizz past in an over-excited haze, and as ever the surrounding buildings are as primed for destruction as the vehicles taking part.

But the real measure of success – of fundamental worth, even – was always going to lie in the comparison. And *Full Auto 2* is redux rather than revolution: the new arena mode, designed to push the emphasis back onto combat, and to provide a greater sense of incremental progress through the game ultimately proves frustrating. It serves mostly the highlight that the series is yet to find the harmony between speed and savagery, velocity and violence, which makes both fall flat. For a so-called battle racer to have so little fire, especially at a time when both EA Guildford and Evolution are flooring the PS3 accelerator, means *Full Auto 2* can't help but look a little limp .

What's also hard to help is the sense that this is not much more than a bare-bones 360 build, decorated it with vague dabs of PS3 paint. It's never clear if what you're seeing is superior, and never is there a moment when it's anything beyond similar. That control system whereby one stick steers while the other aims, a finger curling over the face buttons as others manage bumpers and triggers, continues to define a game with eyes bigger than its stomach.

Once, when the original *Full Auto* overwhelmed itself as much as its players, it felt disarmingly absurd. But while suspension of disbelief can stretch to accommodate the odd genuine flaw – inconsistencies between what objects you can and can't punch through, for example – the sequel has too many to hide. Knocking over the steel supports of a ship before ricocheting off mere cargo crates is one thing; doing so as a nearby wall simply vanishes to reveal the void beyond is another. Overall, it's impossible to shake the impression of an uneasy compromise: of a game that falls between platforms as well as genres. **[5]**



Firepower is augmented in exactly the same way as in the first *Full Auto*. Shotguns are extremely powerful and provided quite early on, allowing you to experiment with destroying your opponents before later stages

Revved up rewind



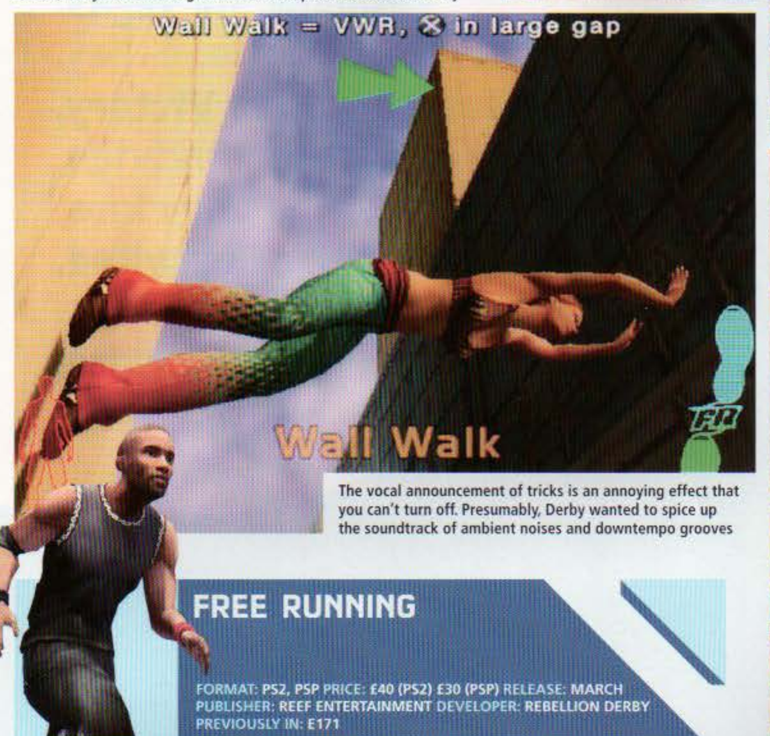
Battlelines **reprises** ***Full Auto*****'s ability to allow players to instantly rewind action in races. Although familar from the likes of** ***Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time*****, it's actually implemented very well in the extremely quick stages of** ***Full Auto 2*****. Aside from being a neat visual trick, rewinding action performs a special 'unwrecking' mode, allowing cars to go back to the state they were in before a crash occurs. On the downside, turning back time can disrupt the flow of gameplay and feels like a bit of a cheat.**



Sega is making a lot out of the underlying engine's ability to reflect car damage – crumpling after an impact is fairly realistic, but details like these are sometimes lost in the frenetic speed of most challenges and the fireballs filling the air

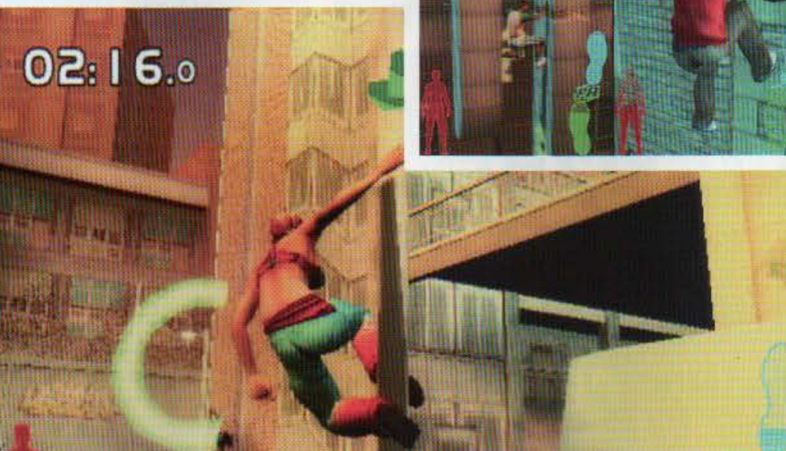
Depending on your readiness to risk smashing you ragdoll traceur on distant concrete, the game's pace can be either stilted or fluidic. The trembling pause between stunts gives a great impression of real-world nerves, but your ultimate goal will be to tap out combos fearlessly

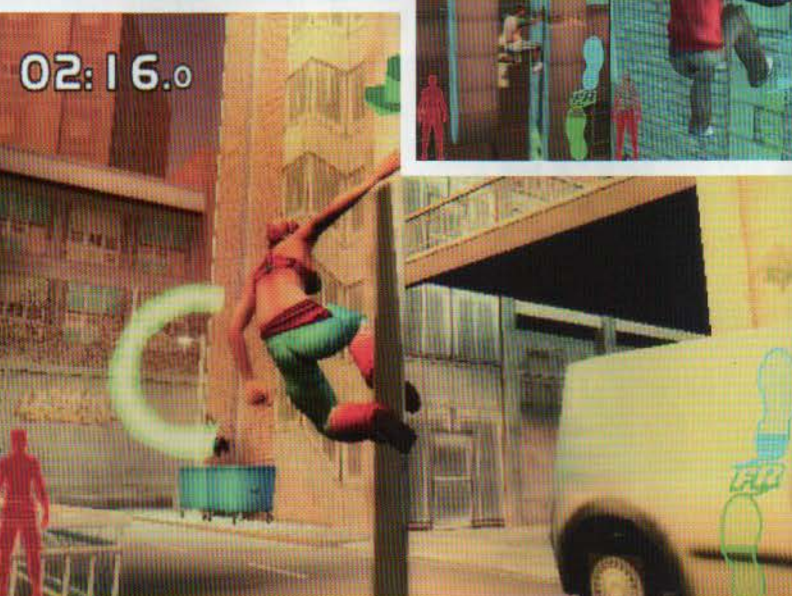
The crash objectives in which multipliers, banana skins and TNT boxes must be chained for injury bonuses is a dubious knock to an already wavering sense of realism, but isolated from the other objectives it's fun enough



The vocal announcement of tricks is an annoying effect that you can't turn off. Presumably, Derby wanted to spice up the soundtrack of ambient noises and downtempo grooves



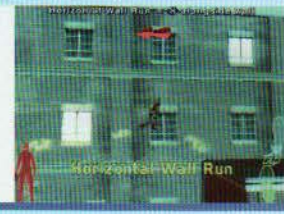




FREE RUNNING

FORMAT: PS2, PSP PRICE: £40 (PS2) £30 (PSP) RELEASE: MARCH
PUBLISHER: REEF ENTERTAINMENT DEVELOPER: REBELLION DERBY
PREVIOUSLY IN: E171

Running riot



Though some are obvious (which is no bad thing), *Free Running*'s objectives and modes are a largely incisive bunch which always keep the integrity of the sport, rather than convenience of development, in mind. Ground Zero asks you to plot a course from one point of elevation to a distant objective marker, the rule being that your feet mustn't touch the ground. Landmark Hit places the marker at a high point of the environment, the ensuing puzzle bringing to mind Usborne's old Solve It Yourself adventure books. *Free Running* does feature multiplayer modes, limited to the more competitive of its events, and given its singleplayer workload the engine does an admirable job of keeping things moving at a pace.

Beyond the borderline lunacy of it all, the appeal of parkour lies in discovering a world hidden beneath the one you take for granted. Its proposition: take the mundane geometries of urban life and find in them the potential for something extraordinary, death-defying, and life-affirming. In a rather unflattering example of art imitating life, however, it has found itself no less concealed within the games that it's inspired. Perhaps it's the sterile environments, or the down-to-earth demeanours of its high-flying stars, but for some reason its significance for games like *The Sands Of Time* and *Assassin's Creed* has never earned it a vehicle of its own, until now.

Had *Free Running* never been released (a possibility given the apparent apathy of onetime publisher Eidos) it would have been a shame. The studio formerly known as Core Design has made an utterly captivating game, perfectly attuned to the philosophy and style of the sport it represents, if a little rough around almost every edge.

Similarities to the aforementioned *Sands Of Time* (its moves) and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* (its structure) aren't without cause, or indeed wisdom. *Free Running* shows great discipline when taking inspiration: stealing where there's a perfect fit, tweaking where there's a doubt and inventing where there's a need. So in response to the need for a system whereby jumps can be chained into combos, it provides a fine alternative to the skateboarding revert – a timed button press that converts a landing into a roll, flip, or whatever else will keep you moving. In addition to multipliers awarded for successive stunts, it uses a Flow gauge to reward momentum. Either can play its part in each map's roster of challenges, which incorporate time trials, one-on-one races, waypoint-driven tours and several less orthodox permutations.

In something of a genre tradition, picking all this up and colouring it with tricks is a spasmodic process of trial and error. Had the game not employed an unpredictable camera, bearable yet initially infuriating, it wouldn't have felt so disrupted. Considering how keyed in to its subject *Free Running* often is, these failures in modelling that key capacity of the 'traceur' – spatial awareness – come as an unpleasant surprise, albeit one that patience can teach you to ignore. As ever, it's a question of how much a game earns forgiveness for its faults, this one doing so in earnest.

True, the PS2 has trouble coupling detail with scale and as a result imposes harsh limits on what *Free Running* can achieve. But that makes its credibility as the world's first parkour title all the more remarkable. Its world of sandblasted urban sprawl and industrial rigour, framed within a mock-London skybox with all the definition of a finger painting, soars in value as your chains of somersaults, vaults, wall runs, shimmies and grinds carry you to its peaks. It may be a city separated into modest zones, each British in the worst of ways and built for free running more than roaming, but to become its king can be spellbinding. **[7]**



In a game that's all about confidence, it's good to see that the strictures of *THPS* aren't always observed. Rather than provide a wobbly arc above your head, for instance, *Free Running*'s tests of balance ask simply that you correct the occasional stumble with an analogue nudge



FINAL FANTASY III

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $40 (£20)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US) SPRING 2007 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX





The range of possibilities in composing a party is vast – although many job-types require a huge time investment to realise their potential. Which makes swapping jobs an intimidating process

It's rare that you'll ever think of *FFIII* as anything beyond a faithful re-treading of a 16-year-old game, characterised by straightforward and basic plotting, poor signposting that can – until either luck or divine intervention strikes – leave you floundering, and hour-long grinding sessions that are, as was so often the case at its inception, a mandatory endeavour.

It's a product of a time when hardened roleplayers were better noted for their patience – and it's difficult to see many players tackling the adventure in its entirety. The walking speed for example, especially in the overworld, proves irritating in its sluggishness, and the ankle-biting of the random battles is confounded further by lengthy encounters, where idle stabs of the action button prove as tiresome as the incessant repetition of the victory jingle is joyless.



It's now possible to zoom the camera in closer to the game's environments – something that comes into its own for the game's interiors – as the closest view reveals hidden items in the scenery

Your party, bar the occasional straggler, is always composed of the same four characters. The diversity comes from their ability to alternate between the 23 jobs, roles which you can designate to each to alter the make-up of your party as you see fit. It's a mechanic that's since been rigorously explored through the *Tactics* series – but it still feels liberating, and is undoubtedly the game's stand-out feature.

FFIII's framework, though, again brings its own problems. Exploring the full strength of each job type requires diligent and exhaustive training (often only to be abandoned for another job in the hope that it will yield better results) and, ultimately, the breadth of opposition types rarely warrants anything beyond the traditional make-up of tank-heavy vanguard and token mage and support class.

That's not to say its long awaited international release isn't appreciated, and the effort put into updating it for a new audience commendable, but on its own merits *FFIII* is little more than a well polished museum piece. **[6]**



ENNICHI NO TATSUJIN

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: ¥5,040 (£22)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

'All the fun of the fair.' *Ennichi No Tatsujin*, which roughly translates as 'Festival Master' is almost certain never to see a western release, but if it did, you could bet on that being its tag-line. A Japanese launch title, it offers a virtual tour around domestically familiar fair-ground stalls: fortune tellers, shooting ranges, octopus-dumpling sellers, and grab-a-goldfish booths. At each stall, the Remote and Nunchuck morph, from gun to fishing rod to batter-spreader, and each stall-owner issues a number of gently escalating challenges to prove you have what it takes to master them all.

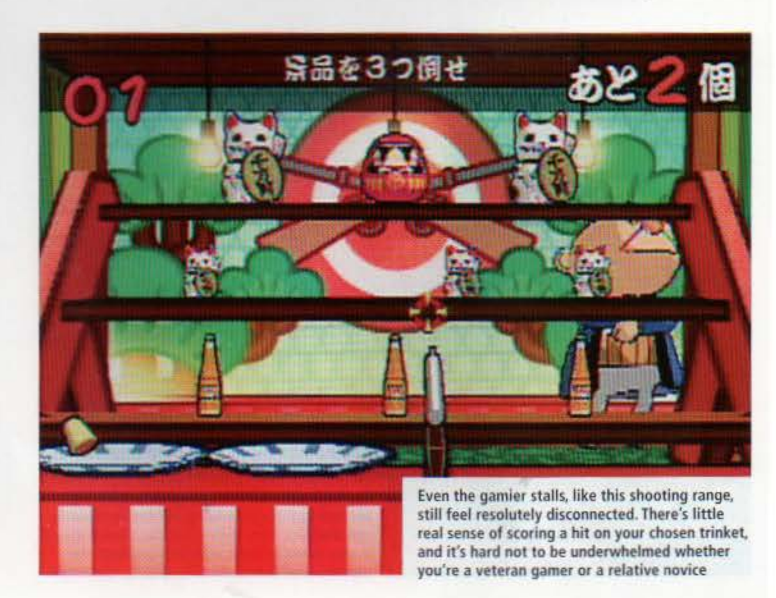
But although most western players' tastes run to hotdogs rather than octopus, that cultural specificity isn't what's most likely to keep *Ennichi No Tatsujin* from crossing the divide. More problematic is the lack of intuition in each of the different control schemes, and the lack of connection with each of the stalls. Despite good tutorials and decent on-screen instructions, the complexity of controls required – dangling the Remote vertically as a fishing rod, arcing Remote and Nunchuk outward in sync as you rub a crystal ball – are rather at odds with the relaxed, convivial atmosphere of the game. And, even once players have adjusted to the different combinations, there's a looseness and awkwardness about a number of them



Crêpe-making is surprisingly demanding, calling for a steady hand as you spread the batter, and then for steely restraint as you load the pancake up with the toppings most likely to win approval

that can kill stone-dead the appeal of a game whose only point is mimicking these familiar tasks.

And that's a shame, because at its best, *Ennichi No Tatsujin* has the slight but solid charm familiar from *Tamagotchi Connection: Corner Shop*. Delicately spreading crêpe batter over a hot-plate, and watching the blank-eyed horror of your customers should you burn any, is instantly engaging. And the single best bit of game design – the rhythm-action styled balloon-animal stall, which asks you to bend and twist a scrolling balloon in time to music – is funny, challenging and satisfying. And it's a shame, because at a time when the Wii is struggling to convince many players that they won't mourn better-quality visuals, *Ennichi No Tatsujin* is vibrant, cheering proof of the way in which Wii games will be able to hold their own for years. **[4]**



Even the gamier stalls, like this shooting range, still feel resolutely disconnected. There's little real sense of scoring a hit on your chosen trinket, and it's hard not to be underwhelmed whether you're a veteran gamer or a relative novice



KIRBY: SQUEAK SQUAD

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $40 (£21) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: FLAGSHIP

Kirby fans should be delighted by this fine little platformer, which eschews the touchscreen route-sketching of last year's *Canvas Curse/Power Paintbrush* in favour of some simple embellishments to the classic *Dream Land* formula. As it did for 2004's GBA title *Amazing Mirror*, HAL Laboratories has handed its pink puffball over to Flagship. The ex-Capcom team is a seasoned Nintendo understudy with several handheld *Zelda*s to its name, and has a much deeper affinity for other people's work than Artoon, whose *Yoshi's Island DS* so disappointed last month.

In pure platforming terms, *Squeak Squad*, like most canonical Kirby, is extremely simple, the fun and sophistication coming instead from the cheerful blob's copy abilities – the attributes he takes on from enemies he inhales. This series is purely and simply about elevating the videogame power-up to the status of art form. *Squeak Squad* takes Kirby's two-dozen quick-change alter egos further than ever before, adding a handful more, empowering some (fire and ice especially) to act on the environment as well as enemies, seeding treasure chests with Copy Scrolls that upgrade them with new moves and attributes. Above all, via a touchscreen representation of Kirby's capacious belly, it allows abilities to be bubbled up, stored, and mixed with items or each other to create alternative or hybrid powers; a full and satisfying expansion of the *Kirby* experience.



The main game is joined by a handful of simple, multiplayer sub-games, which can be shared with other DS owners via download play. They're touchscreen-operated reaction tests, basic in the extreme, and enjoyable only for a few minutes

It doesn't exactly equal depth or long-term challenge; once figured out, the system provides easy access to the whole game and all hidden treasure chests, and *Squeak Squad* overall is a polished, impeccably designed pushover. The thieving gang of mice of the title – who have relieved Kirby of his strawberry shortcake and thus incurred his wrath – spice things up by attempting to steal his treasure at the end of every level, resulting in some initially entertaining, but ultimately samey, scrambling skirmishes. But it's such an endearing, accommodating playground for the mushy mimic's wit and foolishness you can hardly complain. **[7]**



The level furniture is a little plain graphically, but that just serves to bring out the exuberance and charm of the excellent sprites. *Squeak Squad* is also an audio treat, with fizzing effects and superb music in a maniacally upbeat, 16bit style

KORORINPA

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: ¥4,800 (£21)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: HUDSON DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE









Different themes ensure that *Kororinpa* feels like a pleasant place to be, and manages to be homely and surreal at exactly the same time. There's no camera control (this is no-button gaming at its purest), so you may want to take advantage of the map mode (top right) before you start, to plan your route through the more fiendish levels

For a number of families – many more than some might have expected a year or so ago – the burning question after a happy Christmas of gaming is: where next after *Wii Sports*? A lacklustre western launch line-up, short of the kind of Touch! Generation games that the Wii's widespread appeal rests on, has left many wanting. It's one of the launch's ironies that it's the most hardcore of the Wii's fans – those who chose to import a Japanese version of the console – that are best placed to enjoy its most mainstream games.

Kororinpa is perhaps the plainest example of that. As a game it is impossible to explain: you'll be able to see that yourself from the screenshots. Marble, maze, motion-sensitive controller. Indeed, the most useful touchstone may be Live Arcade's *Marble Blast Ultra*, as *Kororinpa* shares its forgiving approach to player progression: collect the gems to open the exit, and relax since the only penalty for falling off is added to your time. And, with moving platforms, glassy ice-patches, suction tubes, fans and blind drops, falling off is something that you'll become used to. The big shift that this game brings beyond the well-tilted territory of *Marble Madness*, *Mercury Meltdown* and *Super Monkey Ball*, is that it's testing an ability you've already honed. The physicality of the controller means that it isn't testing your gamesmanship: it's testing how good you are at, say, balancing a tea-tray. And the combination of that real-world instinct with the precision of the Remote's sensors means that it's never been so easy, or so satisfying, to flick victory from the jaws of defeat.

With handsomely designed environments, and a deviously three-dimensional approach to level design, *Kororinpa* is exactly the kind of simple, sustaining software that the Wii needs to build on. Hardened gamers may feel they've seen it all before – right up until the moment Auntie May demolishes their high score table. **[6]**



Longer mazes prove a real test of nerve as well as patience: checkpoints take the pain out of re-doing the whole thing each time you tumble off





EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 3

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: ¥7,140 (£30)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (US, UK)
PUBLISHER: D3 PUBLISHER DEVELOPER: SANDLOT

For the third game in a series to feature less variety than *Serious Sam II* may sound like the worst first impression that it's possible to make, but *Earth Defense Force 3* zeroes in on mono-carnage more intensely than any other riot-like shooter around. It's a single and quite fantastic note of action, sustained for a whole game. Its few environments are mercilessly recycled, as are the seek 'n' destroy objectives of every mission and the enemies – enormous ants, giant arachnids, gleaming UFO fighters, massive bipedal walkers, kilometre-wide dropships and motherships – which return time and time again in barely remixed combinations. Given the game's myopic core, it's no surprise to find little evolution here over PS2's *EDF2*, aside from the upscale in intensity and fidelity. The alternate female character has gone, and a mech has been added to the list of attack vehicles, but the combat is still most successfully bolstered by the enormous cache of unlockable weapons, offering plenty of choice in just how cleanly and remotely you want to mulch your way through the incoming hordes.

But *EDF3* succeeds above many a sci-fi action game attempt to drop the player into a war-torn world simply by tearing the world apart with a war that takes place right in front of them, via the multitudes of enemies that seethe and swarm around the huge stages. And it's a game world that offers extraordinary, but lightweight, physical consistency. If an enemy is in line of sight you can see it, and shoot



The game's biggest irk is its errant enemies, and having to mop up stragglers – who've failed to turn up at an ambush chokepoint, or have simply wandered off – can be a deathly dull task

it, while all buildings can crumble and defeated enemies splatter and flip through the air. But that's where the connection ends; falling debris and corpses do no secondary damage and quickly vanish – a blessing rather than a criticism, or the battlefield would become impregnable, given the death tolls and firepower already at work within it all.

A single rocket is enough to take down even the broadest skyscraper, and basic machine-gun bursts can stagger a towering metal mech – it's a game geared toward turning you into an unsubtle, minimum-requirement weapon of mass destruction, and nothing else. Some of its finer visual details are far from fine, and the framerate can topple under the assault, on top of camera shudders and widescreen explosions so fierce as to be disorienting. But the illusion of epic-scale warfare remains a powerful and entertaining one, broken most significantly by the player's need to avoid overexposing themselves to its fundamentally tedious nature. **[6]**

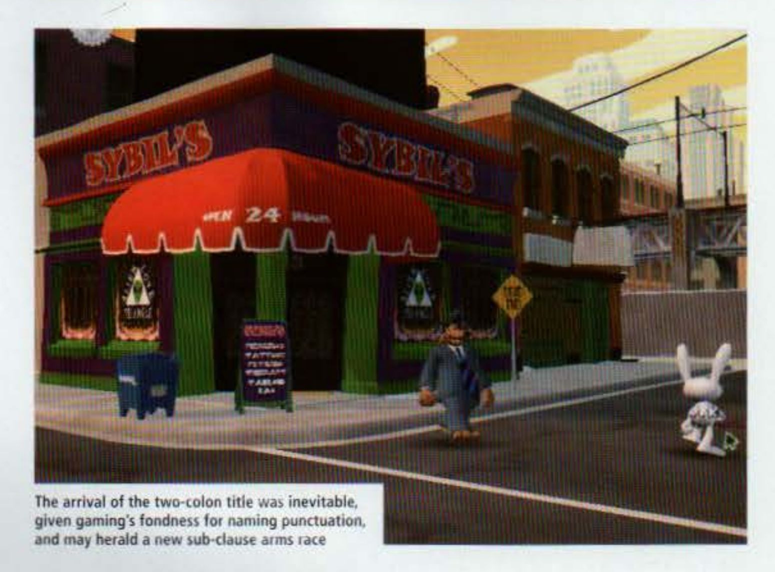
Allied human squads, despite being anonymous simpletons, engender unexpected camaraderie through their sheer enthusiasm, chanting ("EDF! EDF!") as they open fire on distant enemies





SAM & MAX: SITUATION: COMEDY

FORMAT: PC PRICE: $9 (£5) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TELLTALE GAMES
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The arrival of the two-colon title was inevitable, given gaming's fondness for naming punctuation, and may herald a new sub-clause arms race

The return of *Sam & Max* is a noble story of triumph over the impossible. A cancelled fan-favourite picked up by another publisher – more out of philanthropy, it would seem, than any broadly capitalist agenda – the series is perfectly placed to play the role of plucky survivor. It's also perfectly placed to make you feel terribly guilty for wishing the finished article was a bit better than it actually is.

That's certainly not to say that *Situation: Comedy* is a disaster. Only two games in, and *Sam & Max* is proving that what it takes to succeed with episodic games is the correct structure for a self-contained afternoon's entertainment, and hints of a larger narrative that may eventually draw all the stories together. *Situation: Comedy* has both, and although essentially an extended locked-door puzzle, the game's challenges are logical and often satisfying.

But even if it's a supreme achievement for Telltale Games to have squeezed a beginning, middle and end into such a tight space, the results can still seem a little underwhelming, especially when there's so much padding and backtracking to go through. And in response to the short running time, the game has substituted length for width, so almost every screen is a riot of posters, product names, warning signs and tabloid headlines. The inevitable effect of such a broadside of gags is that the hit ratio is lower than it should be, and even though *Situation: Comedy* zealously aims for the easiest of targets – cheap television – its satire can feel obvious at times, and its parodies fall flat a little more frequently than they should.

Although it's easy to fault, *Situation: Comedy* is still hard to dislike. For roughly the price of an XBLA download, Telltale Games has created a title that will never lose your goodwill, nor drive you to anger, and it certainly won't outstay its welcome. Sadly, though, it's not likely to give you much to think about either. If unreleased games are almost always accorded legendary status, *Sam & Max* has a doubly difficult job ahead of it: cancellation was one thing, but it's resurrection that can prove really difficult to overcome. **[6]**



Sybil makes a welcome return from *Culture Shock*, boasting a career change from psychotherapist to tabloid journalist, and specialising, naturally, in scoops about aliens



TIME EXTEND

JET SET RADIO FUTURE

FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SMILEBIT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2002**

Microsoft's original love letter to the Japanese market may have left it jilted at the altar, but in the process did it create something far bigger than just a game?

The Skyscraper District is perhaps the uppermost point in all of *Jet Set Radio Future's* reimagined Tokyo, the pinnacle of a game so dazzlingly vertiginous it can make your ears pop. It's a five-minute climb to the top of its highest peak – an aeon in gaming terms, a period of time in which you could comfortably save the world in most other titles. But *Jet Set Radio Future* is not most other titles, and the lengthy climb is more than worth the time it takes. There's a collectable Graffiti Soul token up there, as well as tags to lay down en route, but those aren't your real reward. Instead, the prize is something much rarer: 30 seconds of genuine loneliness, until the pull of the streets below becomes too much and you skate off the edge into space, back down to the frothing crowds and the living city spread out around you.

There are things you're supposed to mention when discussing *Jet Set Radio Future*. First, there's the movement, the game's inherent sense of forward momentum; deliriously simple and fiercely pleasing, a few hours mastering rail-riding and roller skating will enable you to zip through levels without ever touching the ground. And then there's the soundtrack: a tangled snarl of Japanese noisecore, sweet-natured hip-hop and sepia-tinted trance delivered with the force of a grand mal seizure. There's the premise, too, with its gaggle of rollerblading counter-culture types taking on a mega-corporation by covering Japan's capital city in graffiti. And, of course, there's the cel-shading: a paint-thin aesthetic triumphantly applied. *Jet Set Radio Future* has it all: poise, elation, and a perfect marriage of visuals, sound, and theme.

Deliriously simple, a few hours mastering rail-riding and roller skating will enable you to zip through levels without ever touching the ground

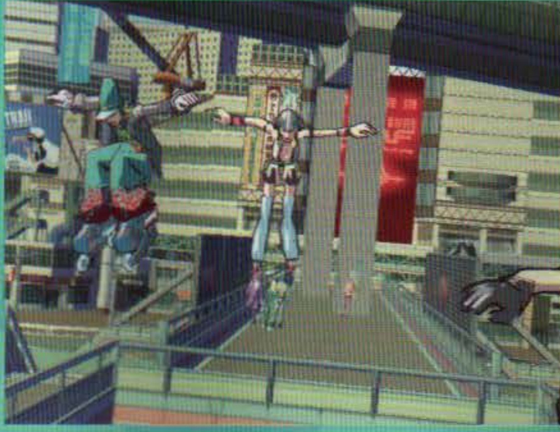
But with that theme comes a huge problem for the designers, because while graffiti may well be the most apt metaphor for creative expression contemporary culture has yet devised, it also strikes games in their weak spot. Simply put, they don't traditionally excel at providing creative expression. There have been art games before, such as *Magic Pengel*, but *JSRF* isn't an art game. It's a platform game, perhaps the purest sequel to 2D *Sonic* yet created – a guided tour of precision jumps to be negotiated at speed.



Although the GG's garage provides the central hub for the game and serve as the storage location for the unlockable characters, it's the lofty, sunbleached Shibuya Terminal that provides the focal point for *JSRF's* world

The original Jet *Set Radio* got around the creativity question by trickery, passing itself off as something it wasn't. The game may have dressed





The gravity-defying leaps and arcs perfectly compliment the game's gracefully distorted movement system. Whilst exaggerated in almost every regard, it manages to remain robust and easy to grasp: tricks, though simple, are a genuine pleasure

like a slacker, but it thought like a project manager. With its multiple challenges and ever-advancing enemies, the ticking clock made *JSR* a peerlessly well-disguised time management exercise. Tags had to be laid down in the best possible order, and the complex environments had to be tirelessly sounded for the quickest route between objectives.

Yet the sequel chose to throw that all away, ditching the complexities of spraying tags and, more importantly, ditching the time limits. With the tension that drove the original game removed, *JSRF* had to become something different, something new.

And it did. With no clock to impinge on the exploration, it placed a new emphasis on the environments. The results are almost without precedent: *Jet Set Radio Future* is not a game, it's a place. It's no coincidence that the story – take back the streets by riding and tagging – puts ownership of the city at its very heart. For once, it's not your life that's at stake, but your way of life, and the success of the tale rests entirely on the game's ability to make you care for the space you're protecting.

The gently futuristic-looking Tokyo of *JSRF* is a dazzlingly memorable environment. Prolonged immersion in those skyscraper canyons reveals that Sega has indeed done the impossible: captured the range, heft and sheer variety of a living city, with its classes, cliques and conflicting forces of veneer and decay. From the sun-lasered concrete of Shibuya Terminal to the coiled neon dragons of 99th Street, or the ravens and abandoned engine yards of Rokkaku-dai Heights with their teetering piles of shanties, Tokyo's discrete locations have a real impact – separate but somehow interlinked; vividly new, yet culturally readable.

It's free-roaming and vast, but it would be wrong to label *JSRF* as a sandbox game. Compared to *GTA* or its clones, the game's city is thinner on almost all counts. Its locations remain scaleable but entirely non-interactive, and its collectables are truly token. Yet the world it creates has more sense of place in one street corner than *Just Cause* could cram into an entire island. How did they do it?

The answer lies with the distinction between realism and a carefully created sense of reality. The most important decision, and one that was handed down from its older brother, is the cel-shading. While it may seem strange that something so wilfully abstract should make a virtual space more believable, the developers understood that photoreal textures would never be able to create consistency and coherency – the Uncanny Valley applies to places as well as people. *JSRF*'s city, patently not taken directly from real life, still makes sense as a whole. That's why its version of Tokyo is both a fantastical cartoon dream and a singularly convincing place at the same time.

The game's attention to creating its own unique reality is a trend that permeates deep into the construction of the levels themselves: although the locations are brightly coloured rollercoasters, they seldom feel like it – for the most part, they seem dictated by the slow outward growth of an evolving metropolis rather than the whims and needs of level designers. The spread of the streets is obscure and convincing, the buildings and parks are messy with natural clutter. In places the city even feels precarious, but only because it seems to have grown too big for itself, an overstacked card tower that threatens to crumble at any moment. The designers want you to see neighbourhoods and districts instead of levels and courses, and the layout



DAY FOR NIGHT

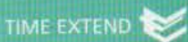
Jet Set Radio Future ditches the conventional day/night cycle of games like *Zelda* and *GTA* in favour of a more controlled approach, with each location fixed at a specific time of day. It's Sega-style thinking all the way, the same totalitarian approach to mood that's enriched its games since the days of *OutRun* and *Afterburner*. Rather than ruining the sense of immersion, *JSRF*'s take on the passage of time seems subtle when compared to the Caesar's Palace-style three-minute afternoon of many sandbox games. The transitions between locations, leaving at dusk, arriving at dawn, elegantly suggests the size and scope of the unseen city.







The city's pedestrians scatter as you barrel your way through the streets: it's just a small touch, maybe, but another indication of the game's cost-efficient approach to the important task of making its world coherent









supports the fiction, even as it guides the player along an invisible path to the finish line.

And on top of that, there are the crowds. On the chattering streets and car-clogged freeways, the sense of life going on independently of the player's own agenda is overwhelming. Almost all the city's spaces are home to masses of curious people whose eccentric appearances raise more questions than they answer, and hint at existences that are quirky and insular. The graffiti war waged against the Rokkaku Group means nothing to them, and rightly so: if the game really seemed to revolve around the player, much of its appeal would be lost.

Most important of all, perhaps, is the clutter. *JSRF* is a defiantly messy game, crowding the screen with all manner of street furniture and detail. These tiny visual flourishes build the game world from the ground upwards in an almost pointillist manner. The noisy jumble of adverts, litter, parking cones and abandoned bicycles that choke the streets all work towards the same goal as the crowds themselves, gently suggesting the functioning chaos of a living, inhabited city, and lending an insight into the people who live there. To evoke this world is to create a list of its many pieces, from the gantries and satellite dishes to the finials, riverbeds and broken girders. Never before has a game featured so much to look at, and so many reasons to keep you looking.



Thematically apt as well as vital to the game's sense of reality, the cel-shaded visuals provide the requisite Sega gloss to the title as well as making excellent screenshots

The result of all this accrued detail is still a singular achievement even four years down the line: *Jet Set Radio Future* not only has a heart, it also has its own opinions and a decidedly liberal perspective. It's not the tank-spraying street fighting that gives the game a pervading sense of social conscience – it's the way the journey through the city unveils the range of conditions in which the population are forced to live. From the lofty glitz of Pharaoh Park to the rusty slums of Kiboaoko Hill, *JSRF* uses its wealth of people and clutter to bore a path through a convincing and recognisable social strata, a culture-blending kaleidoscope of power and poverty that takes shanty towns and penthouse restaurants and mashes them together.

The sense of life going on independently of the player's own agenda is overwhelming. Never before has a game featured so much to look at

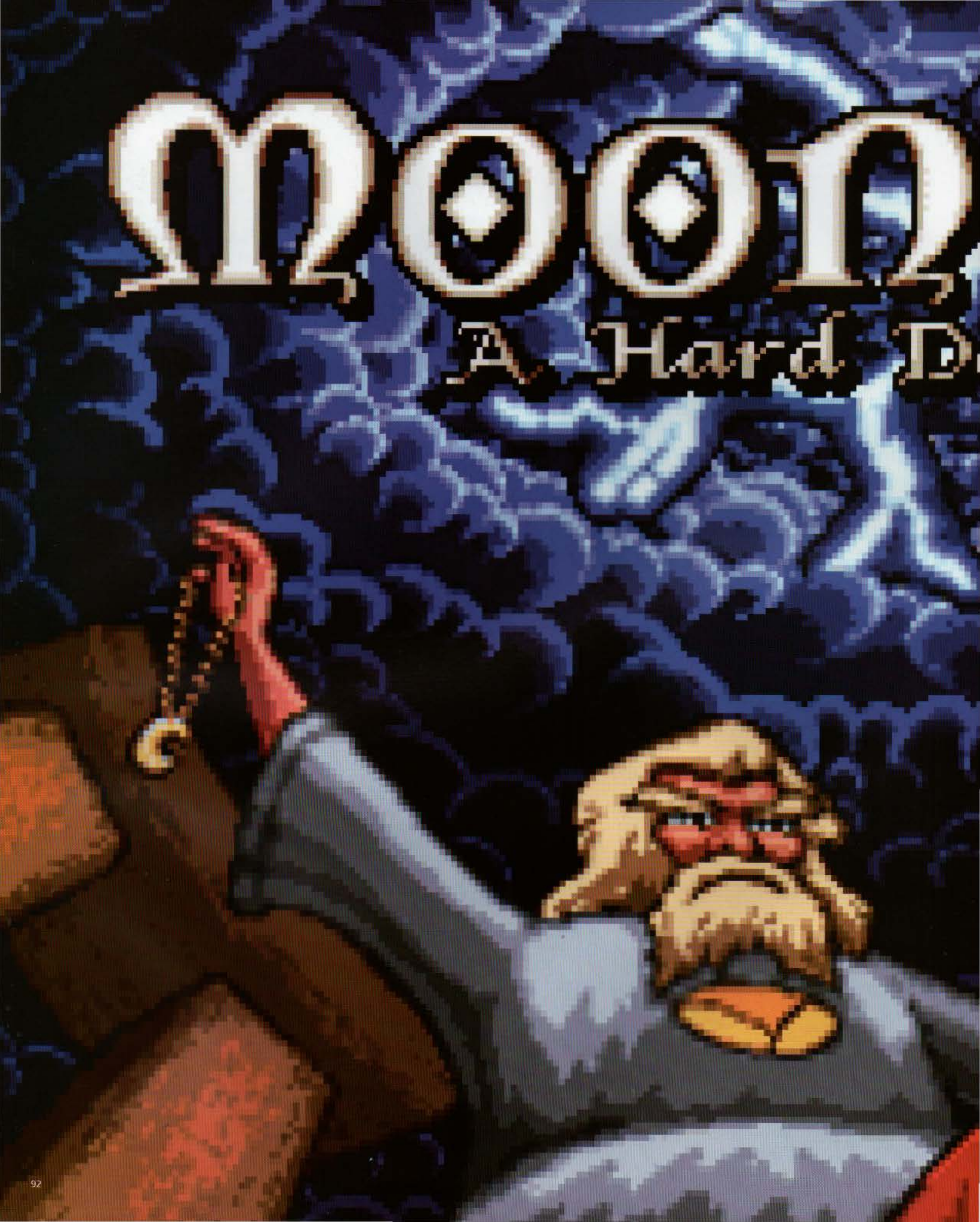
Untidy, but never ugly, the design does its job. Vibrant, considered and genuinely multicultural, it fuses location and gameplay until there's no difference between the two. Once the objectives have been ticked off, you're left with a whole unlocked city to explore, and no reason to do so except for the constant delight of discovery. Does that, in a very roundabout way, place it among the most realistic of videogames? Perhaps. It certainly explains why that Graffiti Soul waiting at the top of the Skyscraper District isn't the real reason you climbed up there. *Jet Set Radio Future* brings an entire city to life in order to show the range and nuance of emotions that games are capable of producing – loneliness, claustrophobia, empathy – as well as shedding light on the kind of design processes that will have to be made if we're going to experience them more often. This simple story of homely rebellion serves as a reminder – even now – of just how rare it is to find a videogame world actually worth saving.

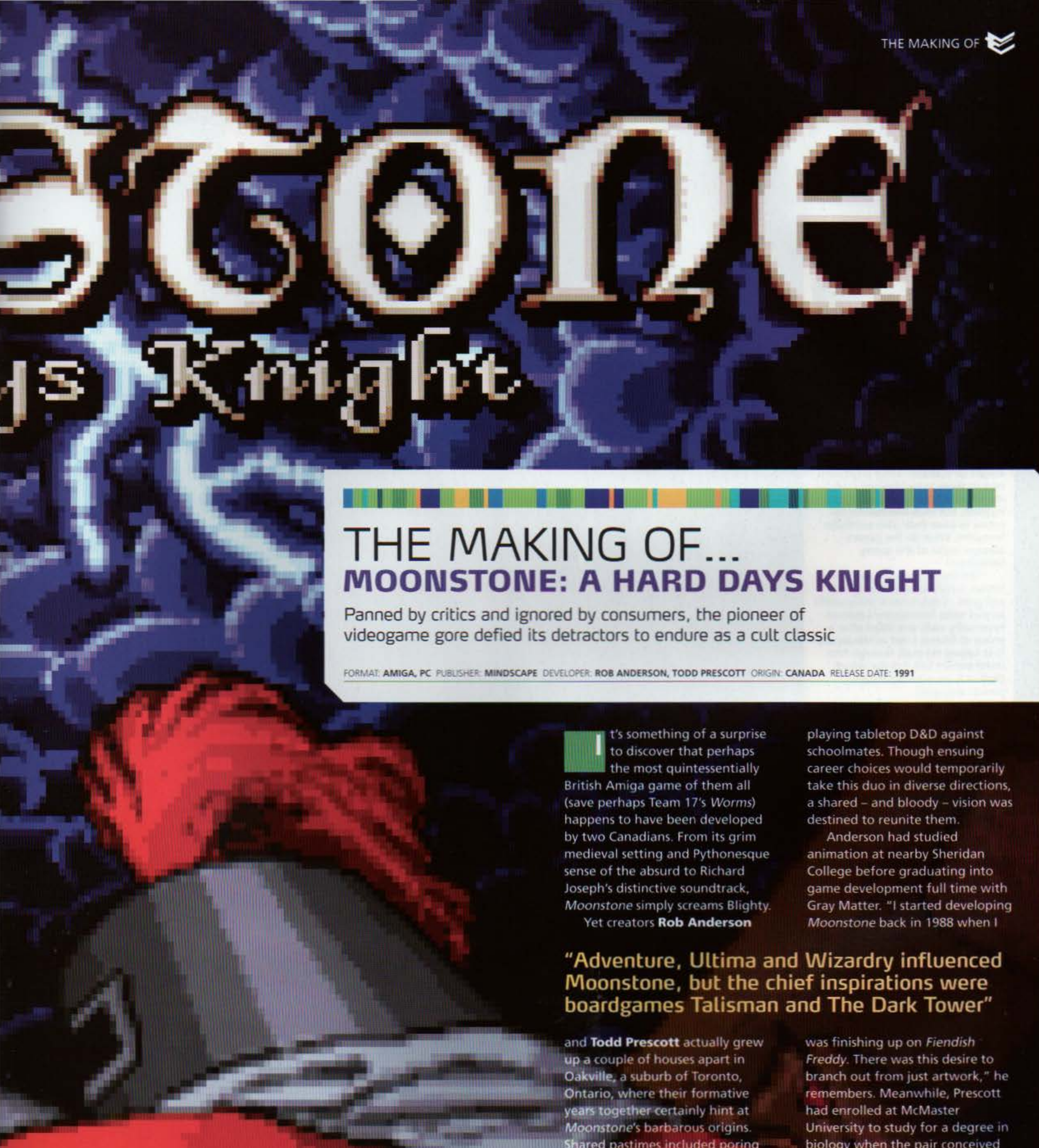


WHAT IS CHOSEN?

While it's customary for Sega games to present a broad range of playable characters, *JSRF* lies at the opposite end of the spectrum to the dreary, ever-expanding cast of *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Even though it's clearly wrong to play as anyone other than Gum, it's easy to fall in love with almost any of the graffiti guerillas lurking throughout Tokyo. While attributes such as speed and agility may suggest a tactical approach to character selection, the real factors to take into account are how they dance when idle, and what they've done with their hair.




Moon
A Hard



THE MAKING OF...
MOONSTONE: A HARD DAYS KNIGHT

Panned by critics and ignored by consumers, the pioneer of videogame gore defied its detractors to endure as a cult classic

FORMAT: **AMIGA, PC** PUBLISHER: **MINDSCAPE** DEVELOPER: **ROB ANDERSON, TODD PRESCOTT** ORIGIN: **CANADA** RELEASE DATE: **1991**

It's something of a surprise to discover that perhaps the most quintessentially British Amiga game of them all (save perhaps Team 17's *Worms*) happens to have been developed by two Canadians. From its grim medieval setting and Pythonesque sense of the absurd to Richard Joseph's distinctive soundtrack, *Moonstone* simply screams Blighty.

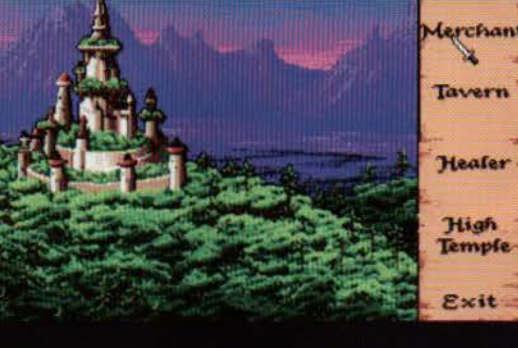
Yet creators **Rob Anderson** and **Todd Prescott** actually grew up a couple of houses apart in Oakville, a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, where their formative years together certainly hint at *Moonstone's* barbarous origins. Shared pastimes included poring over the pulpy fantasy of Robert E Howard, marvelling at John Buscema's Conan the Barbarian comics, watching the films of Sly Stallone and Terry Gilliam and playing tabletop D&D against schoolmates. Though ensuing career choices would temporarily take this duo in diverse directions, a shared – and bloody – vision was destined to reunite them.

Anderson had studied animation at nearby Sheridan College before graduating into game development full time with Gray Matter. "I started developing *Moonstone* back in 1988 when I was finishing up on *Fiendish Freddy*. There was this desire to branch out from just artwork," he remembers. Meanwhile, Prescott had enrolled at McMaster University to study for a degree in biology when the pair conceived their ambitious scheme.

"Adventure, Ultima and Wizardry influenced Moonstone, but the chief inspirations were boardgames Talisman and The Dark Tower"

"I had an Atari 2600 and Apple II+ as a child, and can't help but think that *Adventure, Ultima* and *Wizardry* influenced *Moonstone*









The cycling between inventory, action, map, and conversation gave *Moonstone*'s world a diversity far greater than its fight mechanics suggested



A KNIGHT'S TALE

There are four selectable champions in *Moonstone*: red knight Sir Edward, blue knight Sir Godber, green knight Sir Jeffrey and gold knight Sir Richard. Closer inspection reveals them to be identical save for the colour of their garb and starting location, but each *Moonstone* fan seems to have their own particular favourite. What do the game's creators make of this quirky behaviour?

"The knights actually used to be known simply as red, blue, green, and gold – I didn't name them until I helped write *Moonstone*'s manual. Eventually, each was titled after a group of friends I met at Mindscape that helped me push through final development hell. For the record, Godber is my personal choice," reveals Anderson.

Prescott eschews romanticism in favour of practicality: "My favourite is Sir Edward because I always wanted to get those evil trolls out of the way as early as possible!"



indirectly," recalls Prescott. "However, my chief inspirations were the boardgames Talisman and The Dark Tower – both of which still lurk somewhere in my basement. Rob suggested the idea to his boss at Gray Matter at the time, Chris Gray, and Chris pitched it to Mindscape UK. Before long, we were off to the races."

To this day, *Moonstone* boasts a largely unique gaming formula. Part hack 'n' slash, part RPG, it melds turn-based negotiation of a world map with interludes of startlingly visceral combat. "I devised *Moonstone* as essentially an action-oriented version of a tabletop fantasy game that you're able to finish in a single two- to four-hour session," confirms Prescott.

While the actual combat mechanics clearly derive much of their influence from Palace Software's infamous *Barbarian*, it's hard to watch *Moonstone*'s unique brand of slapstick fatalities without recalling Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Anderson and Prescott even appeared to pay direct homage to Gilliam's film with their very own version of the Black Knights, who doggedly pursue players even after numerous thrashings. They turn out to have rather more mundane origins: "Actually, those Black Knights were forced upon us!" Prescott grins. "I would have preferred to not have them in the game, but Mindscape insisted. I thought the quest and multiplayer aspects more than sufficed."

Dreaming up *Moonstone*'s vast array of gruesome tableaux was unarguably the most gratifying part of the creative process: "Rob got the ball rolling with some neat comical idea – I think it might have been the spearmen skewering the players – and together we just ran with it," recalls Prescott. Hapless quest knights ended up being impaled, eaten, beheaded, crushed, burned, electrocuted, throttled, eviscerated and even hanged – all in the most explicit of fashions. Surely the developers knowingly courted controversy?

Prescott remains bullish: "I don't think we purposely set out to make *Moonstone* as gory as possible; we just wanted to create something we personally wanted to play."

"My personal philosophy was to make *Moonstone* as entertaining to lose as it was to win," Anderson adds. "We weren't aware that it was banned in Germany though," they beam, hinting at a certain pride in their gory endeavours.

Moonstone also contains some of the most renowned audio on Amiga, no mean achievement on a format hardly bereft of classic MOD scores. Even though he was called in to the project at a drastically late stage, celebrated Amiga composer Richard Joseph's dread-evoking dirge certainly added to *Moonstone*'s taut atmosphere of prevailing doom. Anderson waxes lyrical about Joseph's musical contribution: "Considering the timeframe that he was given, Richard's soundtrack was phenomenal – it perfectly captured the essence of *Moonstone*", while Prescott chips in: "I loved the Peter Gabriel feel."

While Joseph's contribution may have been professionalism personified, *Moonstone*'s meaty sound effects didn't stem from quite such unimpeachable sources. "If memory serves correctly, Rob ripped the samples from rented VHS action movies like Red Sonja," recalls Prescott with a wry grin.

Originally envisaged as a one-year project, *Moonstone* ended up dragging on for almost two – a fearsome task considering the core team essentially consisted of just two men. Anderson recalls the gruelling process: "Over a thousand pieces of artwork were, firstly, laid down on paper, before being ported over to Amiga via an EasyL tablet into Deluxe Paint III and IV." Animator Dennis Turner and Anderson then proceeded to render each and every illustration – with Prescott sporadically chipping in: "I drew some of the magic item, sword and armour graphics. Basically, if it looks like a two-year-old drew it, it was probably done by me."

The pressure was telling; some irked gamers might venture that *Moonstone* is equally as infamous for its bugs and frequent crashes as its gore. "Blame me for that one," winces Prescott, "I was enrolled in a full-time degree and

"I don't think we purposely set out to make Moonstone as gory as possible; we wanted to create something we wanted to play"





Onetime Amiga owners venturing into *Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic* may have noticed a slice of *Moonstone* in its action. That rhythm of dodges and button presses, alternating between attack and defence, boasts a timeless sense of momentum







I dramatically underestimated how much free time I had to contribute! In retrospect, a save feature would have been useful, especially when it came to playtesting, but Mindscape wanted to ship for Christmas '91. The stress certainly got to us."

Moonstone's barbaric nature meant that it never saw the light of day in North America, denying the game access to a crucial market. "Toys R Us claimed it was too violent to carry – and in 1990 those guys sold 25 per cent of all videogames in the US, so Mindscape decided against releasing *Moonstone* in the States," Prescott explains, his frustration clear.

And there was further disappointment to come; Mindscape, sensing that *Moonstone*'s emphasis on instant, visceral action might attract Genesis and SNES owners, pitched the game to both Sega and Nintendo. "They both loved the game, but regretted they could simply not release a title containing so much blood," Anderson bemoans. "I pointed out our 'gore switch', but no one wanted to take any risks. The Sega producers and upper management had never tackled a product quite like *Moonstone*, while Nintendo were steadfastly maintaining their policy against blood of any type at that time."

Ironically, less than a year later both Nintendo and Toys R Us famously reconsidered their stance and made a killing with John Tobias and Ed Boon's *Mortal Kombat*. The rest is gaming history. Anderson remains philosophical: "*Mortal Kombat* irrevocably altered the industry's perception, but then Midway had already amassed a loyal following in the arcades – it was safer for them. Still, the times sure have changed when it comes to gore in games nowadays..." Prescott concurs: "*Moonstone* would probably have done very well on console, but the Toys R Us decision doesn't really bother me today; I guess it's just too far in the past."

"Sega had never tackled a product quite like Moonstone, while Nintendo were steadfastly maintaining their policy against any blood"



Retreating from battle into a tavern slowed the game's pace for as long as you cared to throw dice. A wise decision given your life expectancy

Nevertheless, Anderson – who remains on the fringes of the games industry – remains open-minded about the possibility of a belated sequel: "I had written a pretty solid design document, penned ideas and sketched some concept art, but when the original game failed to make a splash in sales, Mindscape backed off. I still ponder making *Moonstone 2* though, so who knows – maybe one day?" With Anderson a confirmed admirer of Microsoft, the opportunities offered by Xbox 360's XNA development kit and the revival of retro on Live Arcade may prove too tempting to ignore.

Prescott, meanwhile, is happily ensconced in his career as a Java programmer: "The games industry resembles a sweatshop environment at times. That's fine when you are 20 and single, not so cool when you are 30 and married. Working on Enterprise Java web apps may not be as sexy as programming C++ games, but those 40-hour weeks are pretty sweet when you want to go golfing or skiing in the Rockies, or play *Half-Life 2* after work! When I retire I might start developing shareware games as a hobby. Of course, never say never..."

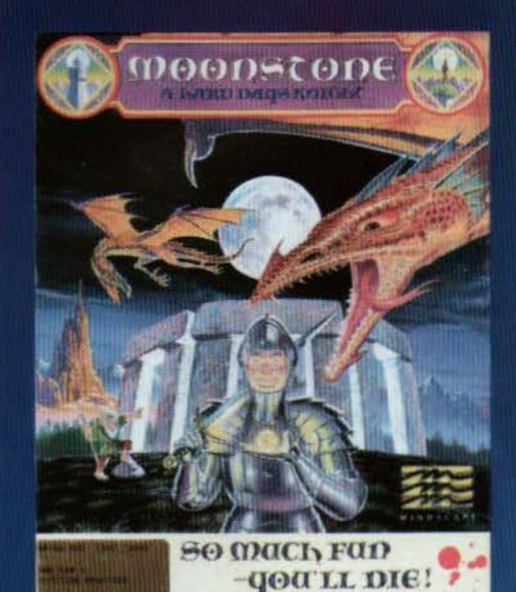
The conversation turns to legacies; ostensibly a rather far-fetched notion considering that *Moonstone* failed to garner either critical or commercial success upon release. So why does it endure as a fan favourite nearly 16 years on? "To this day *Moonstone* remains unique; the only other videogame I can think of which is remotely similar is *Archon* on Atari 800," claims Prescott.

Did they have any influence over the direction of computer game industry? "It would be nice to think so," he laughs, "but at the end of the day money talks and I don't think *Moonstone* made enough of a splash for the industry to notice us. Still, I'm amazed how many people I bump into who have played the game even though it was never released in America – I think that speaks volumes. Money just can't buy that kind of feeling."

Anderson concurs: "*Moonstone* succeeded more as a cult hit, and I'm proud that it still maintains a loyal fan base."



The scraps of surviving concept art bear little of the game's visual magic. As with many of the Amiga's classics, the true works of art were the sprites that could imitate everything from blood to guts



Perhaps it was a stray swipe of the broadsword that amputated the apostrophe from *Moonstone*'s subtitle. Or those spongy Amiga keys

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Blimey! Games Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: June 2005

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: more than 60 fulltime staff

KEY STAFF: Ian Bell, CEO/creative director
Andy Garton, technical director
Stephen Viljoen, COO/designer
Eric Boosman, assistant creative director



URL: www.blimeygames.com

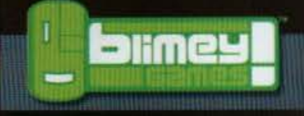
SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY (as part of SimBin)
GTR, GT Legends, GTR 2







Blimey! Games' racing titles have been noted for their high level of realism and consequent difficulty





LOCATION:
London, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS:
A racing title using the official Ferrari licence and offers from publishers to begin development of a second racing game in February are being considered

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Blimey! Games is an entertainment software development company headquartered in London and comprised of world-class artists and programmers, united with the single vision of creating the most detailed and authentic products, providing the most immersive and enjoyable gameplay experiences possible.

"We believe the most satisfying gameplay comes from a high level of immersion. The more detailed a game is, and the better those details fit together, the more enjoyable the experience. We constantly strive to improve detail and realism to provide the most immersive gameplay available.

"The development methodology used internally at Blimey is called 'insourcing', which leverages the cost benefits of outsourcing in a unique new way. Although we have a significantly sized main development office in London, our company operates 'virtually', employing the talents of many developers and artists around the world.

"Every single person on staff has a voice to express their thoughts on all facets of a project, and therefore the real ability to make the game they want. In this way, everyone makes the project their own and is invested in the vision. This voice is also what allows us to retain so many quality staff. Morale stays high if you feel you matter and can make a difference."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: University of Hull Department of Computer Science

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 485

URL: www.dcs.hull.ac.uk and www.mscgames.com

CONTACT: dcs@hull.ac.uk



KEY STAFF

Dr John Purdy, games subject leader
Warren Viant, head of department
Derek Wills, dean of faculty

KEY ALUMNI

Francisco Viciana – rendering lead on *NBA Next Gen* (360, PS3) at EA Vancouver; Andrew Hubbard – lead physics programmer on *Burnout* at Criterion Games; Jason Egginton – XBox 360 game programmer on *Worms* at Team17; Hussain Sheikh – core technology programmer (PS3) at Climax Racing/Disney







Hull's games lab contains two JAMMA cabinets with games including *Soul Edge, R-Type, Scramble,* and *Galaxians* that are rotated through the year





LOCATION: Hull

COURSES OFFERED:

MSc games programming (one year), MSc graphics programming (one year), MEng computer science with games development (four years), BSc computer science with games development (three years)

INSIDE VIEW – JOHN SPEAK

"Having come from a slightly different academic background to most computer science students here at Hull I felt I would struggle to adjust to a science based course and keep up with the work load. It wasn't the case in the slightest; software engineering is taught from the basics and gradually up to a very advanced level. Support is constantly offered for those who need it and work is testing yet rewarding. A broad range of areas within computing are taught. I feel my degree has helped prepare me for a career in the games industry.

"Hull offers great facilities, being one of the only universities in the country to offer GameCube development kits giving students a chance to write games for not only PCs but a range of platforms including consoles. The first year concentrates on bringing everyone up to speed on basic computer skills and introduces the world of software engineering. This begins with C# and then concentrates more on C++ in the second and third years as the course changes from generic computing skills to games development skills.

"Hull teaches good foundations for software engineering needed for the industry as well as teaching how to design games, work as part of a team and appreciate the skills needed to make fully working games.

"The campus is a few miles outside the city centre, the student union has an award-winning nightclub on campus, and every amenity for student life is within a short walk, with regular buses to get you where you want to go."



The Q factor

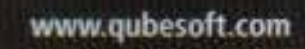
After several years of operating in stealth mode, the UK graphics company behind DirectX breaks cover to speed up game development



Servan Keondjian, CEO, Qube Software



Jamie Fowlston, Q's program manager



www.qubesoft.com

When it comes to software development, doing something properly can take longer than you expect. "When I left Microsoft, I thought: 'Six years and we'll be done'", recalls **Servan Keondjian**, CEO of London-based Qube Software. That was over eight years ago.

But Keondjian, who worked at Redmond after his previous company RenderMorphics was bought to create the basis for the DirectX game development technology, hasn't been slacking. In fact, rather quietly, Qube Software (which also includes RenderMorphics' co-founder Doug Rabson as CTO), has been hard at work. One of its ongoing projects is LEGO's Digital Designer software. It's also just launched Earthsim (see 'Shooting stars'), a virtual planetary simulation based on NASA data. These consumer projects aren't the reason for Qube's existence though; they're merely outward facing examples of what's been going on behind the scenes. "Our mission has been to come up with a middleware solution that game developers will actually like," Keondjian says, with a grin.

Now finally ready to reveal the company's generic and extensible engine and tools framework – functionally named Q 2.0 – he believes the timing couldn't have worked out better if he'd planned it. "It's taken us longer than we thought but we didn't want to come out and say, 'This is the thing we're proud of' until we believed it was," he says. This neatly coincides with the belief that the next-generation transition is forcing the industry to consider new ways of making games.

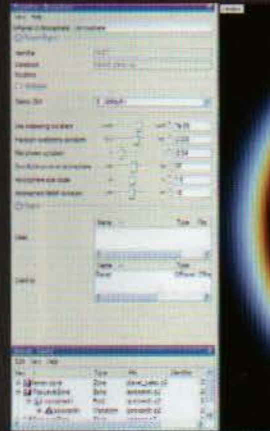


"Our mission has been to come up with a middleware solution that game developers will actually like"

"The talk about Middleware 2.0 is a huge vindication of the direction we've taken," says Keondjian. "Everyone's trying to deconstruct the engine. The monolith is being broken down into lots of pieces. This is the approach we've been working on for a long time and we've got a finished version."

Of course, as previously covered in **E**166's Codeshop, tools companies such as Freescale and Emergent, as well as Microsoft with its XNA initiative, are moving towards a framework-based approach too. Where Qube hopes to make an impact, however, is the fundamental manner with which it's employed the philosophy into the architecture of a game engine – basically stripping it right down to a low level framework, with hundreds of plug-ins being used to provide specific game-related functionality.

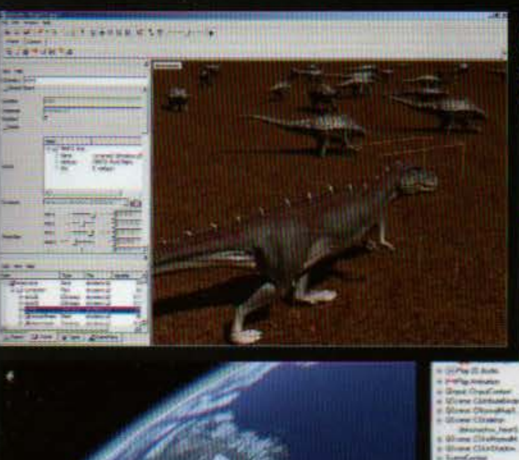
The most important feature in this context is how Q 2.0 gives developers a coherent basis for development. Open and flexible, it means they can import

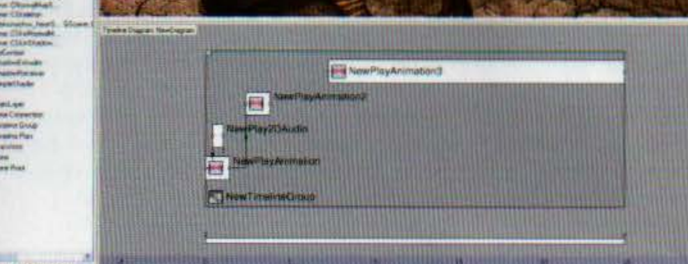




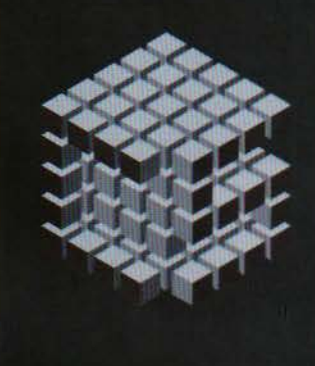
The QServer production tool links the realtime framework into the art pipeline: each plug-in can automatically generate a bank of attribute sliders. Here, shaders relating to the Earth's atmosphere enable artists to manipulate the look of game assets without further input from programmers







Qube is proud of its Q 2.0 data streaming functionality where, in the case of Earthsim, the terrain rendering plug-in streams around 450 MB of data, little of which is held in memory



Shown here demonstrating the stars of Earthsim's World of Dinosaurs, the Q 2.0 engine technology is a lightweight framework designed to be populated with specific plug-in components, such as animation state machines and AI, which can be shared across projects and studios

their existing game components, as well as building up a library of technologies that can be shared between multiple teams. This also links into the production pipeline companion. Called QServer, it links the realtime engine components into the workflow of an artist or a level editor.

As Keondjian points out, the level of expertise this requires means Q isn't a technology for newbie studios that just want to take the latest firstperson-shooter engine and swap in some new art assets. It's designed to make game development a faster process, but it won't necessarily make it simpler, at least to begin with.

Perhaps a better way to think about how you'd use Q 2.0 is the idea of building up complex structures with small building block components, like a kid with a large pile of Lego bricks. Indeed at one point Keondjian describes the early work Qube carried out as being comparable to defining a stud format to ensure everything will neatly fit together.

A more technical comparison he uses is the 3D art package Maya. "One way of looking at what we've done is the way Maya gets used in the film industry where studios write their own modelling and rendering plug-ins and shaders," he explains. "What we've done is a similar thing for game studios, but providing a realtime framework into which you can plug in your own rendering system, while data management, streaming, networking and compression are provided. And we've spent a lot of time working on the mundane stuff, making sure it's really good, because unless it is, it nerfs you when you do the complex stuff."

One outcome of this is that Q goes against conventional wisdom by not providing official integrations with other middleware providers. Indeed, Keondjian reckons that selling middleware isn't about providing companies with the best graphics any more. "It's about giving clients the facilities to plug in their own graphics algorithm for the type of game they're trying to make," he says.

So while Q does ship with default graphics plug-ins, he doesn't expect many clients to use them. Even more sacrilegious in its attitude towards the middleware gods, Q doesn't ship with any artificial intelligence or physics components at all.

Keondjian doesn't think this will be an issue though. "Any lead coder can look at what we're providing and see how to put physics into it," he says. "Q is for studios that already know what they're doing, that have engine technology and tools they're proud of and want to keep, while also overhauling for nextgen."

Already in discussions with one as yet unnamed UK studio, Qube is looking for further candidates it can work closely with, in the hope both sides can get the most out of the situation.

"What we really care about is the relationship," Keondjian emphasises. "We want to make sure Q will be the right technology for the game they are doing. We're not going to do a hard sell. It's all about finding people who know what they're doing and making sure we can support them, so their games are commercially successful and our technology is endorsed."

But with that situation unlikely to occur until 2008 at the earliest, Qube continues to work under the assumption that good things come to those who wait for a while.

Embracing all platforms

Having worked on titles such as *Driver* and *Stuntman*, **Jamie Fowlston** knows first-hand the challenge of shipping games. Having spent a couple of years working on Q, the program manager is now putting that experience in the service of the next generation of game developers. "My take is Q gives you the best of both worlds," he says. "Because it's built out of those little components that work together, you can use the components supplied or if you need extra functionality you can knock out our ones and put in your own ones."

"You could call Q a meta-engine," he continues. "But it's not an empty framework. We include all the pieces you'd consider vaguely generic apart from artificial intelligence and physics. It's also cross-platform in a way that nothing else is as far as I know."

Q runs across PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2 and Xbox, with Windows, Linux and Mac all supported. Xbox 360 will also be added soon; it's only been ignored so far because it's considered the easiest to support.

In fact, Fowlston says the technology could be ported to any hardware with floating point processors. PSP and Wii are other options, at least if customers request them. "We've been running on PlayStation 2 during development to make sure it's really optimised," he says.

The technology itself uses a single, unified data format similar to Microsoft's Component Object Model albeit much more optimised, so as long as developers write C++ code that will compile through the various compilers, Q and its plug-ins will run across supported platforms.

In this way, all created plug-ins can be swapped across game projects. "Because we have framework interfaces well defined, anyone can mix and match plug-ins with any other plug-ins, whether from different games or across locations," says Fowlston.

Qube has already written hundreds of plug-ins for its own projects, some of which will be made available to clients. But in future, there's the possibility a commercial market in plug-ins could emerge, in a similar way to one that Autodesk has encouraged around 3ds Max.

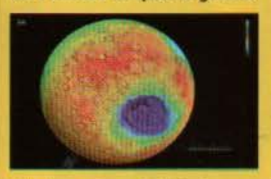


Shooting stars

As well as creating the Q technology, Qube is also working on Earthsim; something CEO Servan Keondjian describes as an online solar system browser and interactive encyclopaedia.

Created using Q 2.0 and QServer, the Earth and the Moon can be downloaded for free (from www.earthsim.tv) while the other planets are available on subscription. As well as providing the ability to explore the planets, Qube is also planning to create interactive documentaries based around the technology. Examples include astronomical discoveries such as the search for water on the surface of Mars, while World of Dinosaurs will provide an in-depth focus into the ecosystem of dinosaurs.

"Earthsim has been a good excuse to create lots of graphical effects and write different plug-ins that we can then put into the engine," he says. "We're also considering doing a more traditional game project but Earthsim will help us get the message out that Q isn't limited to specific genres.



Qube hopes to use Earthsim to create interactive documentaries, on subjects such as the search for water on the surface of Mars

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

A GOOD PROBLEM TO HAVE

BY JEFF MINTER

Well, I admit that I don't agree wholeheartedly with some of **Edge**'s editorial about the PS3 in **E**170. For one thing, the article invoked a comparison of the visualisers present in the 0x360 and the PS3 in order to, apparently, illustrate the two companies' different approach. The 360 was said to have an 'angular, psychedelic' visualiser, whereas the PS3's was more soft and fluid. (And, oh yeah, it was 'interesting' that Sony would offer you the privilege of paying for two more visualisations through their download system.)

Now – and here I can speak with just a little authority on account of actually having created the 360 visualisation system – I feel I should point out just a tiny omission in that comparison. The 360 actually contains 100 different visualisations, right there from the start, available without the need for download or payment; and those visualisations cover the entire gamut between angular, psychedelic, and soft and fluid and just about any other point you can think of in between. Not to mention the multi-user interactivity which allows interested users to modify any of those 100 visualisations further in a semi-infinite number of ways.

I doubt that the respective default visualisations actually mean anything significant about the attitudes of the two companies – I know that the default on the 360 was simply chosen because I personally found it to be pretty and thought that it had a generally good overall response to most kinds of music, and I suspect that the soft-looking default on the PS3 was likely chosen to be congruent with the style of their UI in general, with the soft, flowing BBC-style ribbons behind everything, a look they introduced a couple of years ago in the PSP UI.

In truth, there isn't that much difference between the two systems; in my opinion, it's too early to try and say that the 360 is the pinnacle of the 'old' generation and the PS3 the dawn of the 'new'. I know plenty of people who work with both machines and the consensus is one of rough equivalence. The PS3 is quieter than the 360 – that's nice. And it has Blu-ray, which is also nice if you have an HD telly. The 360 arguably has a slightly better GPU; the PS3 arguably has a slightly better CPU. MS has a better online infrastructure and I personally like the Blades UI more than the PSP/PS3 one.

As for the relevance of Blu-ray (and HD-DVD for that matter) in gaming, well, in my opinion that point is moot anyway. Given modern game engines there should be no need to fill up such a prodigious amount of capacity with FMV; engines are so good these days that cutscenes and the like can be perfectly well accommodated by the game engine itself. Memory usage should, if anything, be more efficient than previous generations. Few game developers are going to feel obliged to fill up all of a 25GB Blu-ray disc with actual game content, given that they will likely be developing for both platforms, as bilateral development is likely to become even more the norm purely for economic reasons.

> "Simply chucking resources at a project does not magically make it good. More is not always better"

The exceptions will be firstparty games and exclusives, which might use that extra capacity – but at what cost? If you're really going to fill 25GB with stuff that's actual game and not prerendered filler, then you're going to have to employ a lot more people for a lot longer in order to do so – which means even greater development costs and an even higher risk to the development teams in a business that is already perilously risky, and with no guarantee that the results will necessarily be better than what has gone before. Simply chucking resources at a project does not magically make it good. More is not always better.

So: look at the games, ignore the spec wars, because the spec wars are largely irrelevant. Choose according to the exclusives and first-party titles you like best. Me, I'm happy because *Wipeout* has finally been announced for PS3 some time next year, so there will definitely be one sitting under my plasma prior to that getting released. *MotorStorm* looks promising too. I like my crazy drive 'em ups.

Anyway, at the time I'm writing this it's just a few days after Wii-day, so most of my gaming time in the last week has been taken up with Nintendo's new system, the weird-one-out of this gen if ever there was one. First impressions so far are largely favourable. The *Wii Sports* games (well, at least Tennis, Bowling and Golf, which are our faves) were actually more impressive than I thought they would be, and a lot of immediately accessible fun with a surprising amount of nuance in the controls. And having played *Monkey Ball* with the Remote I can't imagine going back to playing it with an analogue stick. And of course there is always *Zelda*, delicious *Zelda*...

As the new year begins I'm a pretty happy gamer. I've two of the emerging generation's machines and enjoy both, and will be getting the third before too many months of 2007 have gone by. The only problem will be making enough time for all the gaming coming my way, and hey, that's a happy kind of problem.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser



Illustration: tstokes

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

VIRTUAL DESIRES

BY TIM GUEST

On a recent Sunday, I stayed awake until 5am. I had work to do, I'd napped earlier, and I wasn't tired, but who was I kidding – I was waiting for the iPhone.

For years now, rumours have spread about a prototype Apple phone. Those who had seen the phone said it was incredible, a touchscreen, tiny, a design classic to do for mobile phones what the iPod did for MP3 players.

On Sunday, Brian Lam at Gizmodo posted a short, cryptic comment: the iPhone would be launched on Monday. I browsed forums, picking up snippets of information until I was confident I knew what the iPhone would look like. Slim. A 4GB or 8GB flash drive. Two batteries, so you could make a call when the music was dead. A full-face touchscreen. I even knew the reason Apple was announcing with such little notice: LG would soon launch the Chocolate KE 850, a similar design, and Apple wanted to beat it to the punch. The next day, the iPhone was launched. By Linksys. It was a series of IP home telephones. The day after, I started to look forward to MacWorld.

The process of cultivating desire is a racket, of course, identical to the rackets of loan adverts on daytime TV – identical, in fact, to the basic racket of capitalist culture. 'Is your life impoverished, polluted, hard to manage?' the marketer asks. 'Have one more loan, one more travel machine, one more electronic device...' – one more, essentially, of the thing that got you there in the first place. What the (so far imaginary) iPhone offered me was simplicity. An MP3 player, an organiser, and a phone! One gadget instead of three! A simpler life! In fact, I already have these things. An iPhone would be one more device, not two less. If I bought an iPhone, the first thing I'd have to do would be to draw up a list of the other organisers I'd need to throw away.

Desire originates in our physical selves. "Soul is only the name of something in the body," Nietzsche wrote. For Nietzsche, the desire to leave the body behind was the desire for death. Paradoxically, the desire to leave the body – a primary motivation for playing videogames – originates in the body. But now, people are starting to tire of leaving their bodies behind.

In the console arms race, Nintendo gambled on the Wii's controller, which can stand in as a sword, golf club or anything designers imagine. The enthusiasm is clear. In their excitement to involve their bodies in videogames, players have destroyed lampshades, decked their wives or kids and impaled the controller into a TV.

> In their excitement to involve their bodies in videogames, players have destroyed lampshades and decked their wives or kids

Elsewhere, other physical analogues of our virtual experience are emerging. GPS mobile phones will soon be able to read notes left in physical locations, and provide information on that odd building you're pointing your phone at. A Korean company has developed a wearable PDA, which, through what it calls the 'Body Area Network' lets you touch devices to interact with them; you can touch a printer to make a hard copy, or touch a person to transfer files.

Kyle Machulis, a self-described 'teledildontics' researcher, has modified an exercise bike so that by pedalling in the real world he could move inside games. Another *World Of WarCraft* fanatic set up a treadmill by his PC, and ran while he played.

But Machulis caught more notice with his most recent invention: a vibrator scripted to interact with a virtual world. In 2005, he built a homebrew dildo attachment for Xbox (which he christened the 'SeXBox'); Machulis told me he had even made a sex-toy controller for text-worlds. In October 2006, he released his latest vibrator script to the public. In a presentation at a recent convention on the subject, Machulis demonstrated his vibrator. He pulled up an example avatar, a blue cube – "an ordinary cube. But if you are a cube, it's kind of hot," – and, in the real world, pulled out a *Rez* trance vibrator. In 2004, Jane Pritchard of the website Game Girl Advance wrote an article about having sex with the trance vibrator – and a thriving secondary market arose (although, after Machulis launched his *Second Life* plug-in, the eBay price for trance vibrators doubled). At the conference, Machulis demonstrated his *Second Life* script; when the cube moved, the vibrator moved with it. It was a proof of concept, and enabled *Second Life* designers to build any sex toy they wanted.

"The same technology could be used for driving or flying games," Machulis told me. "There are quite a few people that use *SL* for sex. They might feel uncomfortable using a webcam or audio setup, or they might have certain needs that cannot be fulfilled through that medium."

For years, advertisers have taught us to seek comfort in machines. Desire and technology have mixed in our minds, and people feel, as a fifth of *EverQuest* residents apparently do, that their primary self is a digital elf. Devices like the vibrator further blur the line between real and imaginary connections – but at least they begin to re-integrate the body, so our favourite way to kill time doesn't necessarily also, in the Nietzschean sense, kill us too.

Tim Guest's book about virtual worlds, Second Lives, will be published by Hutchinson in April. Visit him at timguest.net



IS LENGTH EVERYTHING?

BY MR BIFFO

The other night I watched the extended cut of Peter Jackson's King Kong. The original version was widely criticised for being an hour too long, so it seems a peculiar editorial decision to then extend it even further.

After the first hour – which admittedly would've benefited from being half an hour – the middle and last acts reminded me of a game (and not necessarily one starring Donkey Kong). There's very little plot development from scene to scene, it's merely a series of action sequences to provide an eye-candy adrenaline rush. Nevertheless, as mindless entertainment, I actually quite enjoyed it. Only an idiot would argue that you don't get your money's worth.

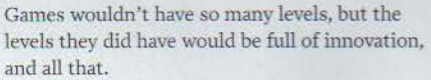
This got me thinking. A few years back there seemed to be a shift in the opinion that the longer the game the better it is. 'They' seemed to be telling us that we were going to get shorter, but sweeter, gaming experiences. Games wouldn't have so many levels, but the levels they did have would be full of innovation, and all that.

Why was this going to happen? Apparently because our lives are now so hectic that we no longer have time to sit down and play through 30-plus hours of a game. Nothing to do with the fact that the shorter the game the more games people are going to buy, and the cheaper they are to produce, or anything.

However, I'm not sure this revolution ever really happened. In an age where games like *GTA* and *Oblivion* take weeks to complete (providing you don't succumb to narcolepsy first), and where the new *Zelda* game is the biggest yet, there are plenty of 'big' games still out there.

What has changed is that we now have more open-ended gaming experiences. Things like *Animal Crossing*, and *Electroplankton*, and *Buzz*, and *Guitar Hero* are games you're likely to return to long after you've seen everything they have to offer. The amount of play you'll get out of something like *Nintendogs* or *The Sims* is determined entirely by the attention span of the individual. Which begs the question: how much life should you be able to get out of a game? How much is a game worth?

I completed *Gears Of War* recently. What it does, it does brilliantly. Just imagine how great it would be if it took longer than a couple of afternoons to complete? What's that you say? I haven't played it on all the difficulty settings, or collected all the COG tags? That's not gameplay. That's like making a cake go further by adding sawdust to the mix. Oh, by all means whinge about the fact I'm not including Xbox Live in all this. Yes, I know I can play the game online, but I didn't spend more than £40 just so I can be called a 'faggot' by some American teen. I know that I could play it through again, this time alongside my special manservant, but the core experience is the singleplayer missions, and that's what I'm paying my £40-£50 for. And I came away from *GOW* feeling ripped off.



"That's not gameplay. That's like making a cake go further by adding sawdust to the mix"

I've always objected to difficulty settings in games (the exceptions being *Perfect Dark Zero* and *Timesplitters 2*, whose objectives differed dependent on which setting you chose). They always felt to me like a way of artificially extending a game. Why bother with the hassle of generating extra gameplay when you can just add a couple of extra lines of code?

I wouldn't actually feel this way were it not for the fact I'm spending £40 or more per game. I know the price of games is an old debate, but it's a debate we no longer seem to be allowed to have. The last man to suggest that we cut the price of games was hounded out of town by a mob brandishing pitchforks.

Back in June last year Sony's **Kaz Hirai** said: "Generally speaking, over the past 12 years or so, there has been a consumer expectation that disc-based games are maybe $59 on the high end to $39 on the low end." Does that seem to you like he's admitting that $39-$59 is what they can get away with, rather than the price games have to be? It's madness. Games do not need to be as expensive as they are – no matter what they tell you. They're just that expensive, because we've all swallowed that bitter pill, and the minute anyone suggests that they're a tad on the pricey side the entire force of the games industry is brought to bear on them.

Cutting the price of games across the board would benefit everyone. It would benefit consumers because they'd be able to afford more than one game every six months, and it would benefit games companies because people would be buying more games.

I'm not even advocating a massive price cut. I don't expect games to be brought in line with the price of DVDs, because films have already had an outing at the cinema (although movies can cost ten times the price of even the biggest game). I just wish there was a sensible reduction so I don't come away feeling ripped off.

There's no way on Earth it'll ever happen, because it would require an industry-wide effort, and no one wants to be first. And while we're all stupid enough to buy overpriced games they're going to keep overpricing them, and literally wiping their bottoms on our money.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television







Issue 171

Win a DS Lite for the best letter

Why do we play games? I'm pretty sure that many would answer 'fun', but is that strictly true?

This question occurred to me the other day while playing *Animal Crossing*, which offers both ends of the gaming spectrum. On the one hand, it's a game which has no tangible 'end' as such, yet on the other is an obssesive-compulsive's worst nightmare; a game which essentially revolves around collecting many items. To put it as such is to do the game a great disservice, but when faced with various lists of numerous items to collect, it's hard to resist the temptation to want to collect them all, for no reason other than to see the words 'Fossils: 52/52'.

In E166, Jeff Minter described how *LocoRoco* had him going back 'for perfect survival and collectables and a better time'. In *Gran Turismo*, we play just to see 'Complete: 100%', after we've obsessively collected and hoarded all the cars on offer. In most any given RPG, we play to maximise the levels of each and every character, thereby conforming perfectly with the (erroneous, I hasten to add) stereotype of a hunched gamer in a darkened room, toiling away on a joypad inches away from a monitor.

Perhaps E169 raised the most valid point against gaming obsessively for numbers. Above any other series, *The Legend Of Zelda* has arguably given us more cherished memories than any other. Whether the first time you walked out into a 3D Hyrule Field, or set Epona free from the Lon-Lon Ranch, or stole a sword from the village shop – no matter; as gamers we risk eroding such memories by needless repetition to the point of laboured grind, just to see a those few simple words and numbers.

Certainly, there's a satisfaction to seeing them, not to mention the bragging rights that are part and parcel, but in doing so, what have you done? Usually erased any magic, not to mention the exciting mystery that goes with not knowing every nook and cranny of a given object. Essentially, you've become a debugger.

"Many gamers will argue that with the latest games at £50, there's more excuse than ever to play a game to death, or boredom, whichever sets in first"

Many gamers will argue that with the latest games at £50, there's more excuse than ever to play a game to death, or boredom, whichever sets in first. But really, isn't just to experience *LocoRoco*'s atmosphere of sound and vision in beautiful, delicious harmony enough? Don't get me wrong, I strongly advocate completing a game but... you get the picture

I applaud Nintendo's accessible and, if you will, casual approach with *Wii Sports* and *Wii Play*. Maybe it is shallow, but at least we'll be gaming for fun again, re-discovering that sense of elation that follows a good multiplayer session with family and friends, win or lose.

Matthew Hadley

Just as the PlayStation 3 and Wii are about to bring some fresh fireworks into our gaming world, the retail climate has suddenly darkened for UK gamers. Lik-Sang, the Hong Kong games importer, ceased trading and Game stopped its ten-day return policy. I feel that my game-buying options have just shrivelled up.

I can't remember how long Game's ten-day policy has been running, but I do know that many people have depended on it to make informed decisions about game purchases. **Edge**'s reviews are a head start in finding a good game, but there really is no accounting for personal taste. As an example, *Prey* got 8/10 on the 360 and I eagerly bought a copy. About 30 minutes later I was cursing the damn thing because I couldn't get out of the first passageway in the alien ship. I don't know whether it was a bug or my non-HD television deliberately hiding things, but either way I was stuck. I duly returned the game as 'not for me' to Game for a refund. I only kept around half of the games that I tried over the years but I know for certain that I will buy much less from now on (or wait until they hit the bargain bin). I know many games have demos but just as many don't, and I am not a gambling man – £50 is just too much for a possible lemon. I don't blame Game in any way – they are just following the UK's obvious progression towards the totally paranoid American retailers' double-sealed DVD and CD cases where there are simply no returns. We've just had it good for too long.

F

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: What should the next big hitting new IP be about? **What plot, what premise, what setting? More distant-age fantasy? Invasion by aliens?**
DrGonzo

An elderly eastern-European woman, possibly in a shawl, defending two young children, as they flee the KGB.
Mr. Brooks

I've said it before and I'll say it again. A firefighting FPS-style game set in an open world culminating in a raging inferno inside a massive skyscraper.
ScotsWahey

Having just watched The Four Feathers last night. I'm after a FPS based in the days of the British Empire. I want realistic loading animations too.
paranoidandroid

Ideally: Cyborg ninja assassins with mind powers riding space dragons made out of guns. Likely: Gangsta warfare in a fully-realised 'living breathing 3D environment' with about five people in it.
Dan Dare

On top of this, Sony have finally managed to close Lik-Sang down. I appreciate Sony's concerns about grey imports, but I used Lik-Sang to buy things like the *Animal Crossing* e-cards – the sort of stuff that was never released here. Now I will have to take another gamble on eBay and hope that I receive something and that it is authentic. At least I can be sure that Sony (UK) has not lost a tiny proportion of sales to its parent company Sony (Japan).

Now I will be obedient and buy games at the price that publishers wish to charge on the day that they choose to release them in the UK with the certainty that their money is safe no matter how poor or bug-ridden their games might be.
Johnny Jetstream

It's a perennial problem, but one which increasingly common downloadable demos may at last be able to ease.



Peter Te's tipsy Mum walked away a cool £200 richer from the family Christmas Wii Bowling competition. Move over, Fatality

"The greatest tools games have are interaction and manipulation, but there is no need to draw parallels with theatre to establish that"

It seems everyone wants a frame of reference for videogames based on another medium. Recently games have been compared to TV, toys and theatre in **Edge**'s Inbox, and the continued reference to films and books – especially in terms of in game narratives – is always apparent. I see all of these comparisons as detrimental to games, a way to bring them further and further away from having their own identity and have them constantly living in the shadow of other entertainment media. I agree with Gareth Martin's point (Inbox, E171) that the greatest tools games have are interaction and manipulation, but there is no need to draw parallels with theatre to establish that. The important thing is to recognise that videogames are a bit like films, toys, TV programmes, theatre, books, real life, sport, comics and even music, but that they aren't a lot like any of them, and they have elements inherent in their makeup which none of the aforementioned can boast.

Only by looking at videogames themselves – at how they affect us on various levels, how we interact with them, how they tell stories and so on – can videogames be better understood and fully exploited. That is not to say that games should never be inspired by ideas from other sources – just that, if they are, it is most important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of games in order to adapt those influences in a way which works best as a game– not anything else.
Jon Bailes

Johnny Jetstream's standard-def telly may have deliberately ruined *Prey* for him. How's that for an argument for a 1080p upgrade?

I listen to a lot of music, I also watch a lot of movies and read books. I have written for a few music websites over the last few years, and there is a population of people residing on these websites who are either professional writers, musicians or people with connections that other people may not have. The thing that always got me about these people is their willingness to enlighten people. There was very rarely anything approaching a condescending know-it-all attitude towards people asking slightly obvious questions. There also seems to be a consensus that, on the whole, my opinion and personal experience is no more or less important than another's. This is of course because books and music are so established that people simply think of them as something to appreciate, discuss and analyse.

I love videogames. I have done for many long years and it pains me to say that despite the distance games have travelled – not only as an ever-growing money-guzzling beast, but the escalating quality and scope of the titles available – the videogame community has little to none of the same spirit and enthusiasm. Perhaps it is because of the difficulty and complexities involved in the making of games as opposed to making music or writing, both of which only require minimal skill and time to engage in on some level, that these walls are constantly put up by the people who could actually be helping us to learn and appreciate games on a whole different level.

Instead, we are left with bizarre accusations of 'fanboy' delivered to the doors of people who dare defend something they love passionately. No similarly odious distinctions are levelled at those who have followed Dylan since the '60s and believe his work to be something of importance. These lines are still drawn regularly by those espousing some god-given objectivity and those in a position of far greater practical knowledge and experience. The game-making world seems at severe odds with its audience, a bizarre elitist clique of the chosen now eradicating subjective reality. In the case of videogames, apparently, the audience is never right.

More inclusion and open discussion from all sectors of the videogame community is the only thing that will eradicate the still prominent segregated sections of 'fanboys' and 'haters.'

Bias is a natural part of art: get used to it.
Paul Casey

A winning sentiment, and a DS Lite winning letter.



Topic: Should games be hard?
A lot of people lately have moaned about the ease of *Zelda TP*, but I really find it to be perfectly balanced between ease and difficulty.
***Lego Star Wars 2* was a very easy game, but at least it enable the whole game to be seen by everyone.**
I really do prefer to see the whole of a game, and as long as it's fun and not too stupidly hard I will do.
But does this make a game less good, being able to see it all?
darkglobe80

I have almost been put off playing games in the past by stupidly difficult sections.
A game should pose a challenge but must also give the player a sense of reward via progression.
It's like girls, you don't like 'em to be too hard to get, but you don't want it easy either. Thrill of the chase, etc.
I think it's a good thing to see all of *Zelda TP*. its a shame if a game doesn't get finished.
minkymu

I would like to see more creative thought behind adaptive difficulty rather than simply making the enemy stronger, dish out less damage, more enemies, etc. But fair play, this is very difficult to achieve. And we should acknowledge how far we have come – try going back and playing a very old game (three lives, no saves, massive difficulty spikes).
HeThinksAgain

Adaptive difficulty will also take away the accomplishment for many seasoned gamers, though. *Ikaruga* was a standard – if you could do it, you were awesome.
Spence

More difficult settings could offer greater scores. Therefore, the only way to get really high scores would be to play like a demon.
darthjim

Continued

Christmas day came and brought with it a Nintendo Wii. At 27 I've been playing games since the Amiga days and have bought and mastered every console from 8bit to the PS3.

The majority of games that I have played have always had me come out on top, the victor so to speak. Playing the Wii against my brother on Xmas morning soon saw a change in the usual brother bashing. We played *Wii Sports* and scores were going against me in nearly every game. Not saying I'm unfit or anything, but I was getting my ass whooped by my younger more agile brother. I put it down to teething problems and 'getting used to' the new controllers, an excuse I'm still trying to use today. My competitive streak got worse and worse the more I got beaten, and it soon became frustrating – but the worst was yet to come. A mother drunk on a couple of sherries; a father, full and tipsy from Christmas dinner wander into the play arena and decide 'that looks easy, even I can play that'. So on comes Wii Bowling and a competition soon ensues with cash being offered (courtesy of dad) as a prize for whoever wins. Hours pass and the competition hots up so much that we are changing batteries on controllers to stop arguments and everyone has a perfect Mii profile to boot. Christmas specials on TV are forgotten and the big family bowling bonanza ends with my mum (who has no prior gaming experience) taking the £200 cash prize. Damn.

We were all beaten by our tipsy mother who just had 'the knack' for the damn Remote. So a valuable lesson was learnt this Christmas, and all bragging rights now handed over to mother (she won't shut up about her eight consecutive strikes). Our pride a little hurt but no real damage done. Fun was had by all and a big huge thanks goes to Nintendo for putting us back in our places. They have levelled the playing field for the average, casual gamer and made games fun again.

For me, it's back to honing my Wii skills in private and maybe a trip to the gym to get into shape in order to keep up with the younger, more agile members of the family. Thanks Nintendo, thanks a flipping lot.

Peter Te

Nintendo has always been clear that the Wii was calibrated for novices, and designed to take hardened pros down a peg or two. What's more interesting is wondering what happens next, when all those novice Wii owners have become veteran Remote-wielders, and – in a new way – veteran gamers.

F

Topic: Q1 announcement predictions

Now that everyone has got their prezzies, how long until someone announces a smaller, sleeker version of what you've just bought, with more memory and two free games?
freethinker

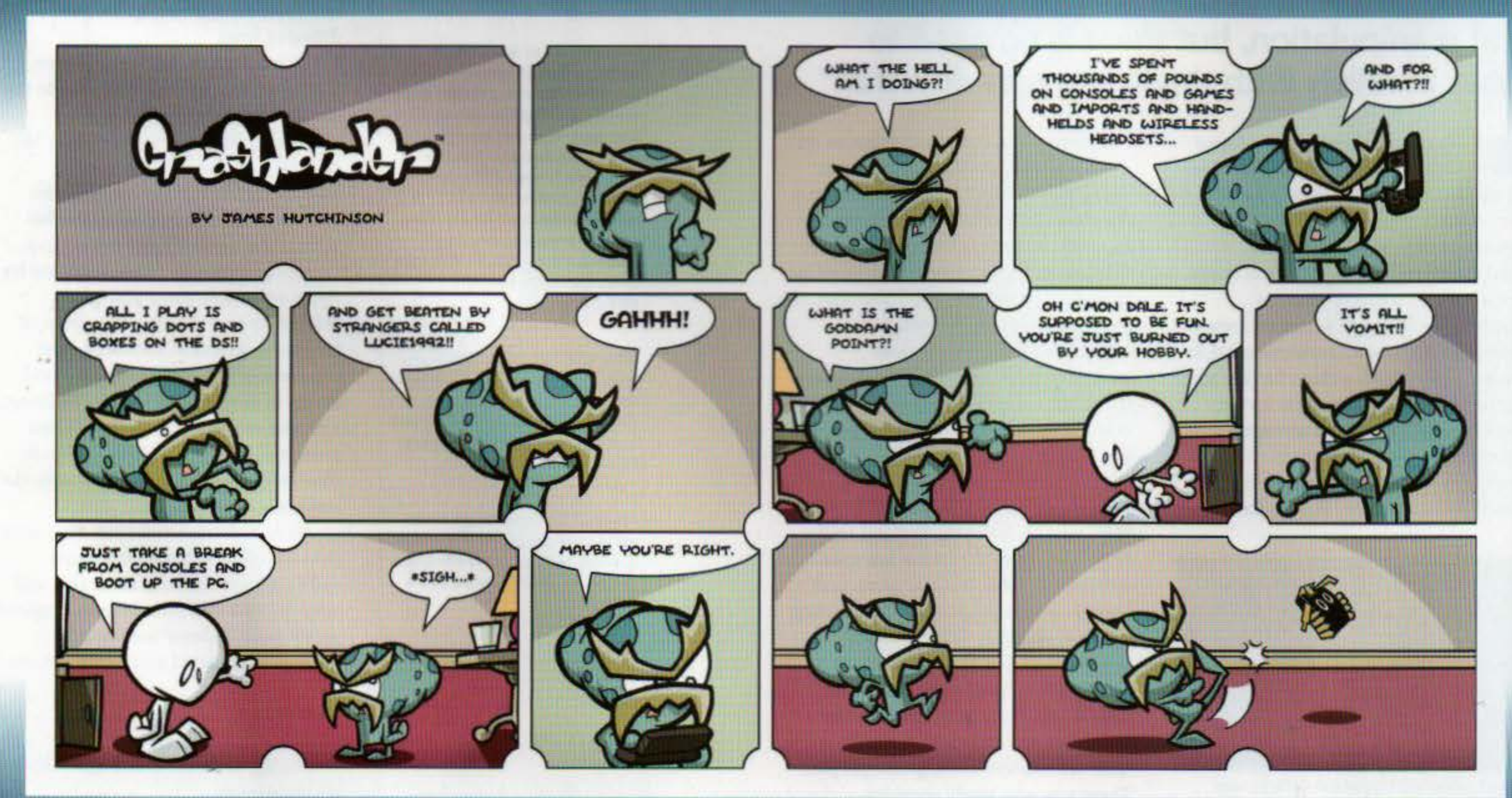
Nintendo announce they have the fastest selling console ever. Sony announce they have the fastest selling console ever.
Hulka T

Everyone will definitely have the fastest selling everything ever.
freethinker

Q1 gets pushed back to Q2.
OTOKO

In the EU, Q1 2007 becomes Q3 2009.
GRIM

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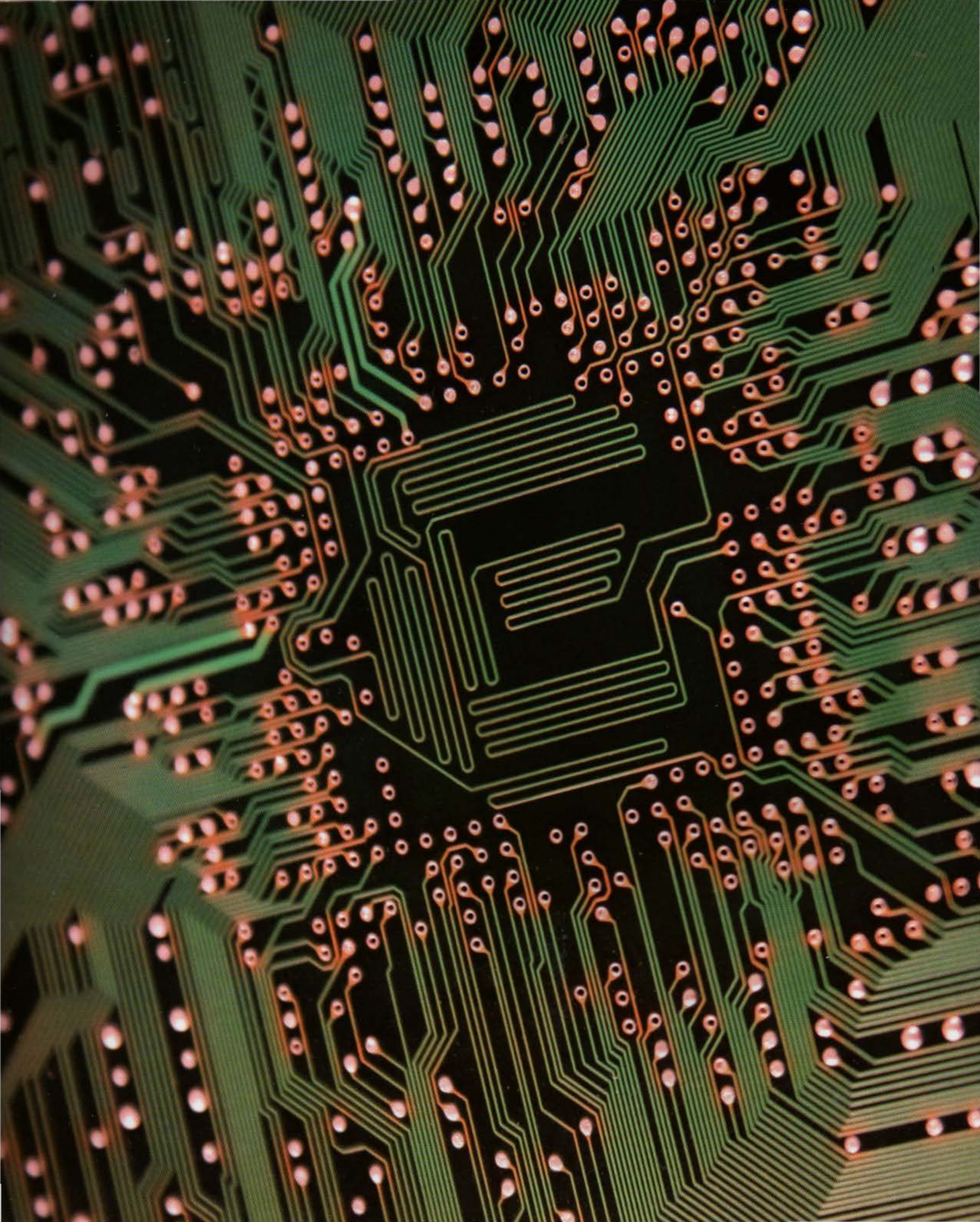


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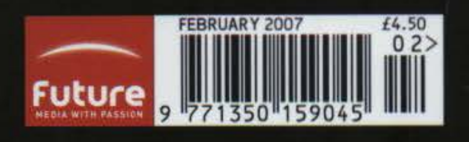


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